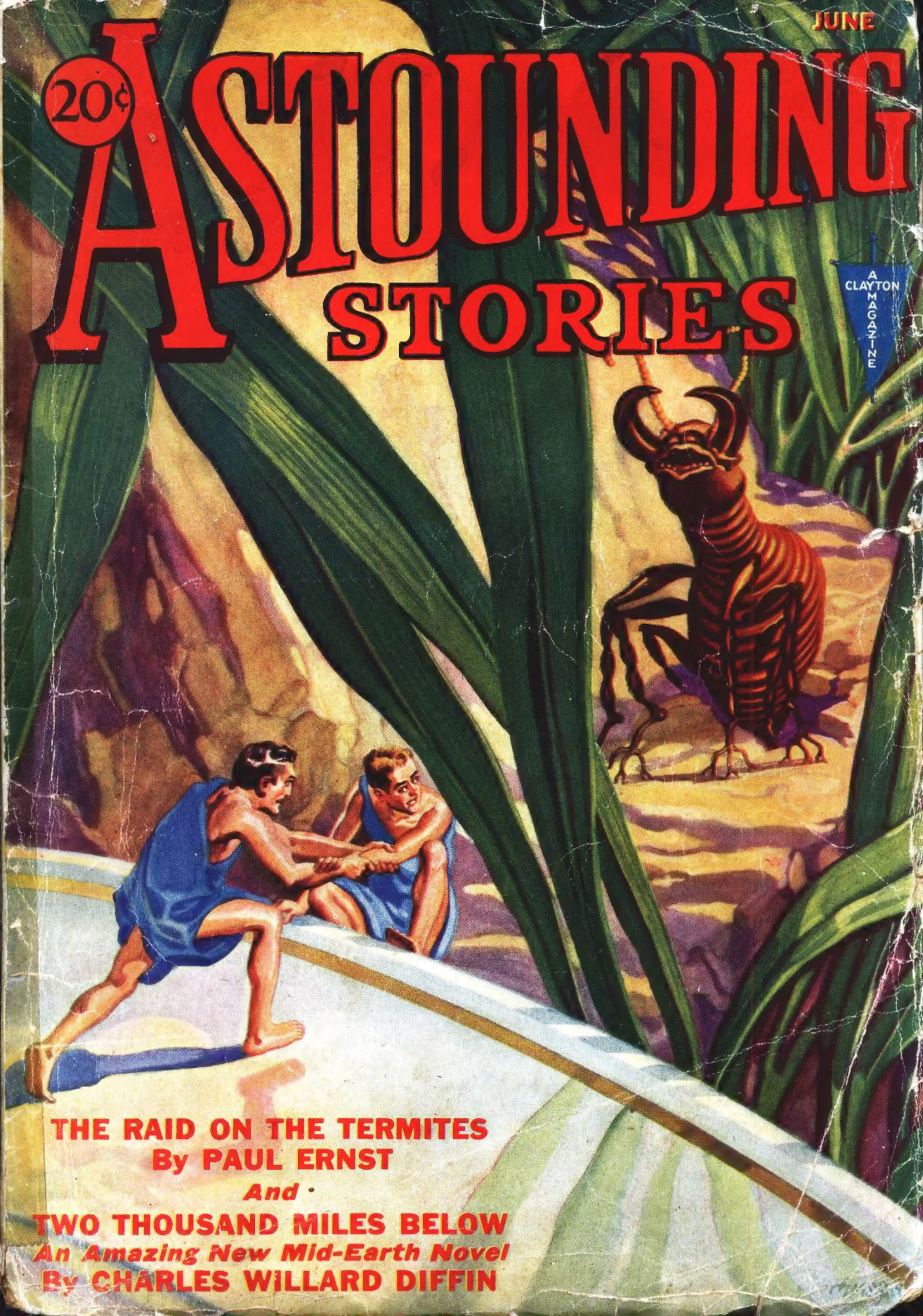
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VOL. X, No. 3 — JUNE, 1932

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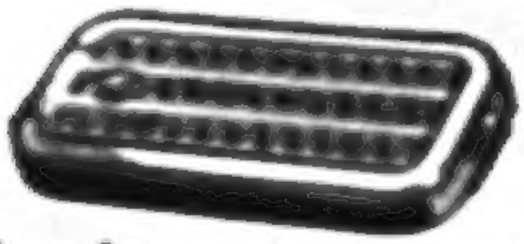

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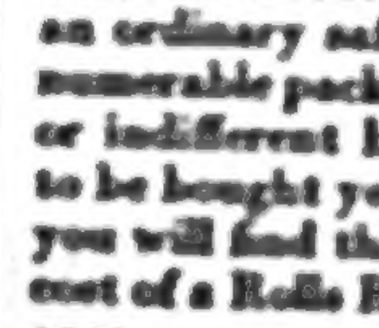

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He was rooted to the spot by an enormous force.

Vulcan's Workshop

By Harl Vincent

SAVAGELY cursing, Luke Fenton reeled backward from the porthole, his great hairy paws clapped over his eyes. No one had warned him, and he did not know that total blindness might result from gazing too earnestly into the sun's unscreened flaming orb, especially with that body not more than twenty million miles distant in space.

He did not know, in fact, that the ethership was that close: Luke had not the faintest notion of the vast distances of the universe or of the absence of air in space which permitted the full intensity of the dazzling rays to strike

Mighty Luke Fenton swaggers defiantly in Vulcan's Workshop, most frightful of Martian prisons.

into his optics unfiltered save by the thick but clear glass which covered the port. He knew only that the sun, evidently very near, was many times its usual size and of infinitely greater brilliance. And he was painfully aware of the fact that the faptastically enlarged and blazing body had seared his eyeballs and caused the floating black spots which now completely obscured his vision.

Stumbling in his blindness, he fell across the hard cot that was the sole article of furniture in the cell he had occupied for more than two weeks. Lying there half dazed and with splitting head, he cursed the guard who had opened the inner cover of the port; cursed anew the fish-eyed Martian judge who had sentenced him to a term in Vulcan's Workshop.

Several of Luke's thirty-eight years had been spent in jails and sundry other penal institutions devised by Earthman and Martian for the punishment of offenders against the laws of organized society. And yet they had failed to break his defiant spirit or to convince him of the infallibility of his creed that might makes right. Nor had they taken from him the gorillalike strength that was in his broad squat body, the magnificent brute lustihood that made him a terror to police and citizen alike. Instead, the many periods of incarceration had only served to increase his hatred of mankind and his contempt of the forces of law and order. Especially was he contemptuous of the book-learning that gave the authorities their power.

As the pain back of his eyes abated, Luke could see dimly the shaft of light that slanted down from the porthole to the bare steel floor. His sight was returning, yet he lay there still, growling in his throat, his mind occupied with thoughts of his checkered past.

STEEL-WORKER, mechanic, roustabout, he had worked in most of the populous cities of Earth and had managed to get into serious trouble wherever he went. It was his boast that he had never killed a man except in fair fight. And yet, at thirty, finding himself wanted by the police of a half dozen cities of Earth, he had signed up in the black gang of a tramp ethership bound for Mars, knowing he would never return and caring not at all.

At first, he had been riotously happy in the changed life on the new world. There had been plenty of soul-satisfying brawls and plenty of chulco, the fiery Martian distillate. On his many and frequent jobs there were excellent opportunities to rebel against authority, and he had fomented numerous mutinies in which he was always victorious but which usually landed him in one of the malodorous Martian jails for a more or less extended stay.

Then had come that final fracas in the Copau foundry on the bank of Canal Pyramus. Overly optimistic, Luke's new boss had struck out at the chunky, red-headed Earthman during an inconsequential argument and had promptly measured his length in a sand pile as a hamlike fist crashed home in return. They had picked up the foreman and taken him to the infirmary where it was found that his skull was fractured and that he had little chance for life. There were the red police after that, and Luke, single-handed, trounced four of them so soundly and thoroughly that someone sent in a riot call. It had taken a dozen of the reserves to club him into submission at the last.

That was too much for Martian justice. In pronouncing sentence the judge had termed Luke an incurably vicious character and a menace to society such as the planet had never harbored. And Luke, his head swathed in bandages from which his

wiry red hair bristled like the comb of a gamecock, had grinned evilly and snarled his defiance.

And so they were taking him to the dread prison camp known as Vulcan's Workshop, a mysterious place of horror and hardship from which no convict had ever returned. Vaguely Luke knew that it was located on still another world, away off somewhere in the heavens. He had seen the lips of men go white when they were condemned to its reputed torture, had heard them plead for death in preference. Yet its terrors had not awed him; they did not awe him now. He had beaten the law before; he'd beat it again—even in Vulcan's Workshop.

A KEY rattled in the lock and Luke Fenton leaped to his feet, facing the barred door with feet spread wide and with his massive shoulders hunched expectantly. He could see now, with much blinking and watering of his still aching eyes, and he looked out with sneering disapproval at the three guards in the corridor. They were afraid of him, singly, these Martian cops, even though armed with the deadly dart guns and with shot-loaded billies. So afraid, Luke chuckled inwardly, that they had kept him from the other prisoners throughout the trip, kept him in solitary confinement.

The door was opening and it came to Luke that the ethership was strangely and hollowly silent. The rocket tubes were stilled, that was it, and even the motors that drove the great ventilating fans had been stopped. They had arrived.

No time now to start anything. He would have to submit tamely to whatever they might mete out to him in the way of punishment—until he got the lay of the land. It would require some time to study things out and to plan. But plan he would, and act; they'd never hold him here until he died of whatever it was that killed men quickly in Vulcan's Workshop. Not Luke Fenton.

Sullenly docile, he was prodded forward to the air-lock. A draft of hot fetid air swept through the corridor, carrying with it the foreboding of unspeakable things to come. And a shriek of mortal terror, wafted in from outside by the stinking breeze, told of some poor devil already demoralized. The thick muscles of Luke's biceps tightened to hard knots under his black prison jacket.

THEY were outside then and Luke essayed a deep breath, a breath that was chokingly acrid in his throat.

"Waugh!" he coughed, and spat. One of the guards laughed.

Any foul epithet that might have formed on Fenton's lips was forgotten in the sight that met his eyes. A barren and rugged terrain stretched out from the landing stage, a land utterly desolate of vegetation and incapable of supporting life. Pockmarked with craters and seamed with yawning fissures from which dense vapors curled, it was seemingly devoid of habitation. And the scene was visible only in the lurid half light of flame-shot mists that hung low over all. In the all too near distance, awesomely vast and ruddy columns of fire rose and fell with monotonous regularity. For the first time, Luke experienced something of the superstitious fear exhibited by even the most hardened criminals when faced with a term at Vulcan's Workshop. That term, to them, meant horror and misery, torture and swift death. And he, too, was ready to believe it now.

He was prodded down an incline that led from the landing stage to the rocks below. The guards from the ethership, he saw, remained be-

hind on the platform and there were new guards awaiting him below. Husky fellows, these were, in strange bulky clothing and armed with the highest powered dart guns. The other prisoners from the vessel were already down there, a huddled and frightened mass—a squashed pile, almost—silent now and watchful of their jailers.

"COME on, show some speed, tough guy!" a guard yelled from the foot of the runway. "Think this is a reception?"

Another of the guards guffawed hoarsely, and Luke choked back the blasting retort that rose in his throat. Plenty of time yet before he'd be ready to make things hot for those birds.

The runway, he observed, was a strip of yielding metal that glowed faintly with an unnatural greenish light. He was nearing its lower end when the siren of the ethership shrieked and he heard the clang of the outer door of its air-lock as it swung to its seat.

Then he stepped out to the smooth stone slab on which the nearest of the guards was standing. Immediately it was as if a tremendous weight was flung upon him, bearing him down until his knees buckled beneath him. He was rooted to the spot by an enormous force which dragged at his vitals and weighted his limbs to leaden uselessness. With a mighty effort he raised his head to look up into the grinning yellow face of the guard, and his thick neck muscles were taut gnarled ridges under the strain.

"Damn your hide!" he howled. "It's a trick. I'll break you in two for this, you slob!"

His huge biceps tensed and his fists came up. But they came up slowly and ineffectually, ponderous things he could scarcely lift. A great roaring of rocket tubes was in his ears then, and the ethership screamed off through the red mists while he dabbed futilely at the leering yellow face. And vile curses rasped from between his set teeth at the laughter of the guards.

LUKE FENTON never had taken the trouble to learn or he would have known something about this planet Vulcan on which he was a prisoner. As far back as 1859, by Earth chronology, its existence within the orbit of Mercury had been reported by one Lescarbault, a French physician. But other astronomers had failed to confirm, in fact had ridiculed his discovery, and it was not until some years after the establishing of interplanetary travel in the first decade of the twenty-first century that the body was definitely located.

Vulcan, the smallest and innermost of the planets, circles the sun with great rapidity at a mean distance of twenty million miles. Its periods of rotation and revolution are equal, so that it always presents the same face toward the solar system's great center of heat and light—for which reason one side is terrifically hot and the other, that facing into outer space, unbearably cold.

There is no life native to the body, and mankind has found it possible to exist only in the narrow belt immediately on the dark side of the terminator, the line of demarcation between night and day. Here there are the dense vapors, illuminated perpetually by refracted light from the daylight side and by the internal fires of the planet itself, fires which erupt at regular intervals through many fissures and craters. And it is only under greatest hardship that man can exist even here, what with the noxious gases and the extremes of heat and cold to which his body is subjected. There is no natural source of water or of food, so these essentials must

of necessity be conveyed from Mars or Earth by ethership.

In spite of all this, man has persisted in establishing himself in the vapor belt of Vulcan for the sake of wresting from the rocky soil its vast deposits of rare ores, and a great number of mining operations are continually in progress. All of these are commercial projects and are worked by adventurous seekers of fortune, save only the penal colony known as Vulcan's Workshop. But no Terrestrial or Martian, however greedy for riches, would dare to remain longer than two lunar months, which is the average time limit of human endurance. Only the condemned remain, and these remain to die.

THOUGH hardly more than two hundred miles in diameter, Vulcan is possessed of a surface gravity almost six times greater than that on Earth. This is due to the planet's core of neutronium, the densest known substance of the universe, a little understood concentration of matter whose atoms comprise only nuclei from which all negative electrons have been stripped by some stupendous cataclysm of nature.

And so it was that Luke Fenton, uninsulated from the tremendous gravity pull when he stepped from the charged metal of the runway, was struggling against his own bodily weight, suddenly increased to more than twelve hundred pounds.

Doggedly, the Earthman pitted his mighty sinews against the force he could not understand. Here was an intangible thing, yet it was a power that challenged his own brute strength, and he exerted himself to the limit in accepting the challenge. With legs spread wide and with sweat oozing from every pore, he heaved himself erect, straightening knees and spine and standing there firmly on his two feet.

"He's carrying it!" came the husky whisper of a guard. "This bird *is* tough."

Craftily, Luke bared his white, even teeth in a good-humored grin. He had seen what they were doing with the other prisoners, fitting them one by one with the strange bulky breeches—garments that gave forth a faint greenish glow like that of the runway. And each of the men, so attired, was enabled somehow to get to his feet easily and walk about as if unhampered by the force which had flattened him to the rocks and which still held Luke's straining body in its grip.

THE yellow-skinned guard, a Terrestrial of Asiatic origin, was solemnly engaged now in lacing the slitted legs of a similar garment to Luke's rigid nether limbs. Yet there was no cessation of that awful weight when the thing was done. The guard stepped back and leered wickedly. He had slung his dart gun over his shoulder and now produced a slender black tube which he leveled at Luke's midsection.

"You walk now, Fenton," he snarled.

The Earthman rose upward as if he would leave the ground. Two or three inches seemed added to his stature, and his muscles trembled from the sudden release. He stepped a pace forward.

Then a light beam flashed forth from the black tube and Luke sagged down with an astonished oath squeezed grunting from his throat. The swift renewal of the inexplicable force had caught him off balance and he dropped ignominiously to his knees.

"Ha!" gloated the Oriental. "It is thus we control the tough ones, Fenton. I've given you a warning; now get up—and march!"

On the last word came blessed release and the return of Luke's strength. He marched, meekly fall-

ing in with the file of new prisoners. He even smiled through the red stubble of his beard. But black hatred was in his heart, and renewed determination that he'd get away from this place somehow—alive.

Time would show him the way.

FENTON'S slow but retentive mind absorbed many things during the succeeding few days. There was neither day nor night in this hellish place—only the flame-lit mists; but they had clocks like those of Earth, and you worked fourteen hours on the slope or in the smelter and had the rest of each so-called day of twenty-four hours in which to eat and sleep.

The food was coarse, but there was plenty of it. There was only water to drink, lukewarm stinking stuff, doled out sparingly in rusty tin cups. And, during the sleeping periods, you were required to take off the gravity-insulated garments and sleep in huts with insulated floor coverings. The charged floor, of course, allowed you to sleep without being smashed flat on the uncomfortable cots. But they had you safe in these sleeping huts: they took away your clothes and you couldn't step out of the door without taking on the weight of a half a dozen men.

The Workshop itself was in a vast excavation from whose slopes a silvery-veined ore was being removed. There were the blast furnace and reduction plant on the one side and the convict's huts and more pretentious houses of the guards on the other. And the choking mists, and the lurid flame behind. The stifling heat. Luke learned, too, that every ninth day, with what they called the libration of Vulcan, there came an equal period of raw and biting cold to replace the heat. As bad or worse, that would be.

There were perhaps three hundred prisoners here, Luke guessed, and a guard allotted to each squad of fifteen men. Not many guards for so large a number of convicts—but enough. The weird gravity of Vulcan had taken care of that, and the flashlight things they always carried—queer lights that would instantly neutralize the insulating property of his clothing and render a man helpless.

LUKE was working high up on the slope, with rock drill and pick. The group to which he had been assigned was composed entirely of new prisoners, mostly white men, but with a few blacks and one coppery-skinned drylander of Mars. Whimpering, hopeless creatures, all of them; not worth his notice. All day he labored without speaking to any of them and the quantities of ore he removed gave mute evidence of his tireless vigor. If Kulan, the giant Martian guard, took any notice of it he gave no sign.

During the sleeping period, which they persisted in calling night, things were different. No guards were needed in the escape-proof huts and there was some surreptitious fraternizing among the prisoners. As long as they made no undue noise, they were left to their own devices. But for the most part they went to sleep heavily and wordlessly as soon as they flung into their bunks. A broken-spirited lot.

Luke saw men suffering from some horrible malady that made them cough and scream and bleed from nose and mouth. Old-timers, these were, men who had survived for as many as three of four months. He saw them, in their agony, beg the guards for merciful death; heard the brutal laughter of their tormentors. Only when they were no longer able to rise from their bunks were they put out of their misery by one of the singing darts from the senior guard's gun.

Novak had it, this malady known as X. C.—Novak, the scar-faced, yellow-fanged rat who occupied the bunk beneath Luke's and who talked to him in hoarse whispers long after the others had gone to sleep. It was from Novak that Luke was learning, and the knowledge he gained by listening to the doomed man served only to intensify the flame of hate that smoldered deep in his barrel-like chest.

After three red-lit days of grueling labor and three similarly red-lit nights of listening to Novak, he reached the grudging conclusion that escape from this place was impossible. With this conviction there came to him a deeper bitterness and the resolve that he, Luke Fenton, would have his revenge before he went the way of the rest.

Perhaps the law had him for keeps this time—it certainly seemed so; but he'd leave his mark on its representatives yet.

AT inspection preceding the next labor period, Luke began doing things.

The prisoners were lined up and the guards were parading the line, reassigning them to new working squads, which were shifted and rearranged every third day. Kulan, the big Martian, selected Luke.

"You, Fenton," he snapped, "ten paces forward."

Luke grinned but made no move.

Amazed, the guard stepped closer. "You heard me!" he roared. "I'm keepin' you in my squad, tough guy."

A ripple of astonished comment ran along the line and the other guards bellowed for silence. Kulan fingered the black tube of his neutro-beam and his broad face was chalky white.

Luke advanced two paces, still grinning. And he looked up sneeringly into the grim face that was a foot above his own.

"That's right, you big ape," he grated, "you ain't man enough to fight the way men fight. Gotta use dart guns, or gravity."

It was sheer baiting of the big Martian. Fenton was shrewd and he knew the fellow's kind, quick to resent insult and prouder of their physical size and prowess than of any other possession. He saw the flush that rose to replace the guard's pallor, saw the huge lithe body go tense. Laughing derisively, he completed his ten paces with leisurely aplomb.

Speechless with rage, Kulan stood rigid. Furtive boos and a few hoarse cheers came from somewhere in the long line of convicts, and Luke saw several men flattened to the ground by swift darting neutro-beams.

And then the head guard came running from the small bastion. "What the hell?" he demanded of Kulan. "Any trouble?"

Kulan saluted, and his eyes were narrow slits. "No sir," he returned stiffly, "no trouble."

Eyeing Luke suspiciously, the senior guard grunted, then moved on along the line. And the work of reallotting squads went on.

IT was exactly as Fenton had expected. This Kulan, a head over him in stature and broad in proportion, was sure in his mind that he could handle the red-headed Earthman without resort to weapons. And the taunt as to his physical ability had struck home. In some way that guard would maneuver matters so the encounter could come about. Besides, he would endeavor to keep Luke in his squad where he would be able to drive him to the utmost. The guards, Novak had said, were on the job only a month when they were replaced by fresh recruits—and their pay was based on the productivity of the squads they commanded. Kulan had seen that the Earthman was a real

supper; worth three of the others. And he'd try to keep it so.

That working period was a highly gratifying one to Luke. With the rankling hatred concentrated and directed at Kulan, he was positively gleeful. And yet he was content to bide his time. He swung his pick and wielded his rock drill with joyful abandon, so that three men were kept busy loading the ore he removed.

Kulan, he saw with satisfaction, was sullen and watchful. But no word passed between the two. And the Earthman knew he had planted a seed that was bound to sprout and grow until it bore fruit.

AT the midday mess it happened. The shifting of men had brought Novak in the same squad with Luke and they came in to sit at the long table together. Kulan eyed them narrowly from the head of the board.

"Say," Novak whispered, "yuh got under Kuley's skin, know it? He'll run yuh ragged."

"Yes?" Luke looked up at the guard, saw he was scowling darkly in their direction, and grinned evilly. "I'll run him, you mean. I'll beat him in two if I get my hands on him."

"Yuh ain't got a chance, I tell yuh. I seen a guy once, take a poke at a guard, and what they done to him was plenty. They—"

With that, the wasted body of Novak bent double and he dropped to the ground screaming. Blood gushed from his nostrils. Luke had seen the same thing happen to several others and he knew what to expect. It was all over for Novak, or nearly over.

Kulan came running and turned the stricken man face up.

"You'll last another period," he snarled. "Get up and eat."

He yanked Novak to his feet and shook him as he would a sack of meal. The sick man moaned and begged, his head rolling from side to side and his eyes filmed with pain.

"Let me have it," he whimpered. "I'm done, I tell yuh Kuley. Get Gannett, if yuh don't believe me."

Kulan slapped him heavily with the flat of his massive hand. "You'll work another period, sewer rat, if I have to prop you up!"

Then Luke Fenton took a chance. He didn't care particularly for Novak, nor was he overly concerned by what might happen to him. But this gave him an excuse, an opening.

He hooked his thick fingers in the collar of Kulan's jacket and twisted until the big Martian loosed Novak and whirled around. Then Luke drove a hard fist to his jaw—a pulled punch so as not to betray his real strength. Nevertheless it set the guard back on his heels and split the taut skin where it landed.

PANDEMONIUM broke loose in the mess hall. Gannett, the senior guard, came bellowing down the aisle, and the squad guards were on their feet in an instant, neutrotubes and dart guns ready. The uproar of the prisoners died down.

Kulan shook his shaggy head and crouched low as he circled the Earthman. Murder was in his heart, and the urge to break this tough guy Fenton with his bare hands. But Gannett was between them.

"Hell's bells!" he yelped. "What goes on here?"

Then he saw Novak—and heard him. Novak was writhing on the ground, begging for death. And the chief guard's dart gun twanged as its needlelike missile sped forth and drove into the sick man's breast where it sang its shrill song of vibratory dissolution.

In the twinkling of an eye where Novak had lain was only the dust of complete disintegration and a

few scintillating, dancing light flecks that swiftly snuffed out. A speedy and merciful end.

In the silence that followed, Gannett turned on Kulan. "Why didn't you send for me?" he demanded.

The guard, white with rage, indicated Luke.

"So—the tough guy Fenton again. Can't you handle him?"

Kulan's yellow eyes flashed fire. "Sure I can; I will. But I want your permission, sir. With my hands."

"No,"—flatly. And then Gannett whirled to look over the mess tables, whence a few scattered hisses had arisen.

His gaze was solemn when he returned it to Kulan. Swiftly his black eyes measured the Martian's giant body, and then they swung to Luke. The comparison evidently pleased him, for he changed his mind.

"On second thought, yes," he said to Kulan. "It'll be good for discipline. Only don't disable him; he's too valuable a worker."

Luke concealed his unholy glee; stood glowering savagely. "In fair fight?" he put in.

"In fair fight," sneered Gannett. He took personal charge of Kulan's weapons. "All right, you," he yelled then to the mess, "you can watch this. But if there's a sound or a move from any one of you there'll be the neutro-broadcast and full gravity for an hour for the whole flea-bitten gang of you."

He drew back, motioning Luke and Kulan to an open space nearby. There was not the slightest doubt in his mind as to the outcome, for the Martian towered over his stocky opponent and was fully fifty pounds heavier. This irregular procedure would put a stop to some of the open homage paid to this reputed tough guy by the prisoners, and to the restlessness among them which his coming had occasioned.

THEY fought instantly and with silent deadliness of purpose, these two. Luke drove in two terrible blows to the big Martian's body in the split-second before they closed, breathtaking punches that rocked Kulan yet did not slow him up in the least. And then the tangle of arms and legs and bodies of the two was so swift moving and violent that the watchers could not follow them.

Now they were up, slugging, clinching; now down, rolling over and over, straining and tearing at each other like beasts of the jungle. Once, breaking free, Luke was seen to batter Kulan's face to a bloody mass with swift, hammering fists that thudded too rapidly to count. And then the Martian had flung him to the rocky ground so heavily that it seemed certain the Earthman's end had come. But such was not the case, for there was a flailing scramble and Luke Fenton rose up with the great body of Kulan across his shoulders. He spread his legs wide and heaved mightily.

The Martian guard kicked and squirmed, lashing out with his huge fists at the squarely-built and squarely-planted body of the Earthman below him. But to no avail. Grasping a shoulder and a thigh, Fenton straightened his thick arms and Kulan was hoisted aloft. Amazingly then, the madly struggling guard was flung out and away to land with a sickening thud, smashed and crumpled on the rocks.

Luke stood swaying on those spreadeagled legs and his lungs were near bursting from the exertion in the noxious atmosphere. "There you are, Gannett," he howled through swollen lips. "That fair enough for you?"

In the ominous silence a cracked voice yelped: "Attaboy Fenton!"

Wild disorder followed. Immediately there was the raucous call of the general alarm siren and a

flashing light from the bastion that paled the red mists to a sickly, luminous pink. Full gravity coming down with crushing force on the hapless prisoners.

Luke, as he was flattened, gasping painfully under the enormous pressure, saw that Gannett and the rest of the guards were not affected by the electro-broadcast. They stood erect and moved freely among the prisoners who sprawled everywhere in grotesque squashed heaps. Queer. There was no way of beating the authorities at this game.

GANNETT transferred Luke to the dreaded sealed cell in the reduction plant, a room spoken of in hushed whispers by the convicts, and in which it was reported an inmate suffered indescribable tortures for the better part of three weeks. Then he died in horrible misery, for one could not survive longer than that.

Kulan had not been killed. He would recover, but was pretty well smashed up, with a fractured hip and several broken ribs, one of which had punctured a lung. It would be necessary to return him to Mars on the next ethership, due in two days. Strangely, the news brought Luke no great amount of satisfaction.

When they locked him up in the sealed cell for his first period of labor he saw there was only one other occupant. A tall lanky Earthman with narrow aristocratic features and keen gray eyes. He was perhaps forty-five, slightly stooped, and with thin graying hair. Luke had seen him several times at mess and had contemptuously classed him as a highbrow. Fuller, his name was.

This was a small room where several slender chutes brought down tumbling crystals of a silvery salt from somewhere above, emptying it into glass containers that stood in endless rows in wooden racks. You filled these containers with the salt, then sealed them in lead tubes and packed them for shipment. There was a faint pungent odor in the air of the room, a new smell that widened Luke's nostrils and caught at his throat and lungs.

In this place you were watched by a guard who came regularly each half hour and spied on you through a peephole.

Child's play, the work in the sealed cell. Luke went at it half-heartedly and he spoke no word to Fuller after the heavy door had closed them in. After ten minutes of silence he caught himself watching his companion furtively.

What was there about Fuller that marked him as superior to Luke and the rest of the convicts? A good gust of wind would blow the man away; a woman might easily beat him in a rough and tumble. Yet this man had something which unmistakably proclaimed greatness, the same something that gave authority and power to the smart guys of Earth and Mars. Brains—book-learning! Luke snorted.

Fuller was looking at him with calmly appraising gaze. Luke scowled darkly, but the keen eyes that measured him did not waver.

"You're a fool, Fenton," came from the thin lips.

"What!" Luke advanced threateningly.

"I repeat: you are a fool." Still the gray eyes were unwavering.

"Why, you—you—" Spasmodically Luke's fingers closed down on the spare shoulder with crushing force.

BY not so much as the flicker of an eyelash did Fuller betray the pain that must have come with that grip. He did not even wince, but swiftly lashed out with a bony fist, raking Luke's cheek with sharp knuckles. The blow stung, but was

utterly futile. With a single cuff Luke could send the man sprawling; with a single wrench of his powerful hands, snap his spine. Yet he did neither, and the impulse to laugh coarsely died in his throat. Here was courage of a kind he never had encountered; here a man in whose bright eyes fearlessness and defiance mingled with a cool disdain that brought the first real feeling of inferiority Luke ever had experienced.

He relaxed his grip of Fuller's shoulder and his big hands fell loosely at his sides. It was that action which saved Fenton. He did not know it at the time, nor would he have believed it. But he was to remember many times and finally to realize it, though he never fully understood.

"That's better," breathed Fuller. And the ghost of a smile crinkled the corner of his mouth.

At the old man's warning Luke returned to his own work bench and was industriously engaged when the guard's eye showed at the peephole. Then the eye was gone and he grinned over at Fuller.

"How long you been in here?" he ventured.

"Five days in the sealed cell; ten altogether in the Workshop."

Luke pondered this. "How'd you get in the cell?"

"Same way you did—I struck a guard."

"No!" marveled Luke. "Mean to tell me you—"

"I had a reason to get in here," Fuller broke in mildly.

"You—you *wanted* to get in?" Luke was incredulous.

"I did."

"My God, you ain't crazy, are you—wantin' to get yourself killed off quicker?"

"NO, that isn't it," Fuller explained patiently. "I've a plan to escape and only by taking the chance of spending some time here could I obtain access to the necessary materials. Fenton, I'm a scientist and I know—"

"Escape!" Luke snorted. "You are crazy. Where you goin' to go?"

"Listen, Fenton." The other dropped his voice. "I'm not doing this blindly; I have friends outside. And you can help me. You can get away yourself, alive. I called you a fool and by that I meant that you have relied too much of brute force in your lifetime and had not sense enough to realize that this brought only trouble. Combine your brawn with my brains, now, and do as I say—if you will I promise you freedom. Will you do it, or do you want to keep on being a fool?"

Luke bristled, but the earnestness of that steady gaze served to check his rising temper. "I still think you're nuts," he growled, "but hell, I ain't fool enough to pass up any kind of chance of gettin' outa here. Gimme the dope."

Fuller coughed slightly and a fleck of red-tinged foam appeared at his lips. "It'll have to be to-day," he whispered. "One more day in this place and it'll be too late for me."

X. C.! Luke stared, horrified. Fuller had it already and didn't know it. Poor devil; he was a goner before he started this crazy break of his. Strangely, Luke was deeply concerned. It was a new experience, this feeling of compassion for a fellow man.

"To-day!" he grunted. "You ain't figurin' on gettin' out to-day?"

"Positively—it must be to-day. I'll explain."

MUCH of what followed was unintelligible to Luke Fenton, but he absorbed enough of the scientist's explanation to understand that his plan was not impossible of realization. He waxed enthusiastic.

Tom Fuller was vague concerning his own past, but Luke gathered that a political crime had been responsible for his sentence to the Workshop. There was much bitterness in the scientist's refusal to dwell on this point. This, too, Luke was able to understand. The bond between them strengthened.

"It's like this," Fuller told him: "these suits which enable us to move about comfortably in Vulcan's gravity are really quite simple in their functioning. A mare of fine wires is woven into the fabric, and these wires are charged with anti-gravity energies from tiny capsules which are inserted under the belt of the garment. The capsules are really miniature atomic generators and are replaced with fresh ones each night during the sleeping period, since the initial charge lasts only eighteen hours. The generated energies neutralize more than eighty percent of the effect of gravity and our weight thus becomes approximately the same as it is on Earth. Such garments are worn by all prospectors and other visitors to Vulcan."

"How come the neutro-beams?" asked Luke.

"They are used only here in the Workshop and they operate the same as the neutro-broadcast from the bastion, the only difference being that the broadcast blankets an area of about two miles in all directions. In both cases vibratory ether waves are sent out and these are of such frequency and wave form as to neutralize the anti-gravity energies originating in our capsules. They render our suits useless, but those of the guards are provided with insulating coverings which block off the waves and thus permit their own garments to function even when the neutro-broadcast is in operation."

"Smart guys," commented Luke. "Too smart. How the devil we gonna get away, then? They'll send out the alarm and—"

"Ah, that is where we fool them, Fenton. With the radium."

"Radium!"

"YES, didn't you know? This ore we mine here contains a higher percentage of that valuable element than any on Earth or Mars. Its emanations, together with certain atmospheric gases of Vulcan, are what cause X. C.—a swift destruction of tissue in the lungs and other vital organs. And this concentrate"—Fuller waved his hand toward the rows of tubes before him—"is most highly radioactive of all the products of the Workshop. That is why the sealed cell is so very dangerous to work in. But it is this radioactive salt that gives us the means for escape—"

Both men turned quickly to their labors on hearing the footsteps of the guard.

"My suit is already prepared," continued Fuller, when the eye had gone from the peephole. "Now to prepare yours. I discovered that this radioactivity can be used to defeat the purpose of the neutro-rays as well or better than the regular insulation, which, of course, we can not obtain. That is why I wanted to be in the sealed cell for a time. We merely pack a quantity of the radioactive salt around the capsules in the lining of our garments, and the radium emanations continue the excitation of the tiny atomic generators even under the influence of the neutralizing vibrations. Do you follow me?"

"Yes."

Luke did comprehend, even though the technical explanation was beyond his understanding. They would be able to defy this terrible gravity of Vulcan. They could fight unhampered; walk, or run—to meet these mysterious

friends of Fuller's. The flashlights and the broadcast would be useless against them.

The lanky scientist outlined the further details of his plan in swift whispers while he worked with the energizing capsule of Luke's garment.

ACTUAL escape was surprisingly easy. They waited until the labor period was finished, when Chan Dai, the yellow-skinned guard, came to unlock the door. As agreed, Tom Fuller came out first and Luke held back, dragging his feet and cursing softly to himself.

"What'd you say?" the guard snarled.

Luke grinned disarmingly. "Nothin'," he drawled. Still he hung back, scarcely moving from where he stood just within the door.

"Come on, tough guy, a little speed." Chan Dai reached for him.

And then Luke was upon him. The neutro-beam flashed harmlessly. Luke's big hands moved with lightning swiftness, his left one scooping the guard's dart gun from its shoulder strap and his right closing on the astonished Oriental's windpipe. It was the work of only an instant to choke him in unconsciousness and lock him in the sealed cell.

"Quick, the chute!" hissed Fuller. He dived head foremost into a rectangular wooden trough that was used for the disposal of the gangue from a crushing mill above. This chute, Fuller had said, led to the outside at the back of the reduction plant.

Across the passage Luke saw a squad of convicts and two guards emerging from the lift. Then he plunged down the steeply inclined trough after Fuller. As he slid and tumbled into the darkness, he heard the hoarse shouting of the guards.

He landed heavily in the pile of gangue at the base of the chute; then was scrambling and slipping down with an avalanche of the sharp edged stone. At the bottom, he saw that Fuller had already started up the slope of the great pit which enclosed the Workshop. Luke darted after him.

THEY were hidden from the bastion by the buildings of the smelter and reduction plant. But the loud yelling of guards back there in the pit gave evidence that word of the escape was being passed along to Gannett. Before they were halfway up the slope there was the shriek of the alarm siren, and Luke felt his body sag with a sudden increase of weight. Fool that he had been to trust the scrawny scientist!

"It's the broadcast," panted Fuller, beside him. "There is some effect, of course. You're probably carrying fifty extra pounds."

"Hub!" Luke hoped it would be no worse.

Fuller slipped into a narrow crevasse that ran slantwise of the slope and extended upward to the rim of the pit. The going was much easier here and they made rapid progress toward the top. Suddenly Luke realized that it was growing very cold; there was a bite to the foul air, and moisture from the red mist was frosting his beard. The liberation of the tiny planet and consequent shifting of the terminator was bringing frigidity to Vulcan's Workshop.

They came up out of the crevasse at the top of the pit and Luke could not resist looking back. Every convict in sight was flattened to the ground. They sprawled singly and in heaps, each one a squashed inert thing that would not move again until the neutro-broadcast was discontinued. The guards, confident they would find the escaped prisoners in like condition, were searching the slope below them.

Luke raised Chan Dai's dart gun to his shoulder.

Fuller struck aside the muzzle of the weapon. "No!" he protested. "No unnecessary killing. Fenton. They're completely fooled, and we'll be well on our way before they know the truth."

Grumbling, Luke drew back from the rim of the excavation.

UP here the ground was fairly level, but there were many fissures and small craters which made the footing precarious. The mists were so dense they could see scarcely two hundred feet ahead.

"We'll be lost in the vapors when they finally wake up and come out after us," Fuller said. "And look, Fenton, off there to the left are the three columns of fire that mark the rendezvous."

They plunged on through the red mist toward the flaming pillars. Those beacons, even though they subsided at regular intervals, quickly reappeared after each cessation. And their brilliance penetrated the mists with ease at this distance of about two miles. There was no fear of missing their destination.

"Sure your friends'll be there?" Luke asked doubtingly. He was beginning to have some misgivings about the matter—the scientist had been anything but explicit as to who these friends were. And the longer his thoughts dwelt upon the things Fuller had told him the more suspicious he became. Pretty cagey about everything but the actual getting away from the Workshop, Fuller had been.

"Certainly they will; they've been waiting two days." Fuller's tone was impatient and his words came painfully. "You leave that part of it to me, Fenton," he gasped. There was a fleck of blood at his lips.

As the scientist stumbled on through the mists, Luke's doubts increased and he began to lose his respect for the man's intellect and for the cunning which had enabled him to outwit the neutralizing energies used by the guards. After all, he was a weak and puny specimen. They all were, the smart guys who held the people of two worlds in their power by exercising the knowledge they had learned from books. And this one had failed even in that; whatever he might have been, he had run afoul of the law himself and was already a doomed man. Tricks! This trick of Fuller's had gotten them away, but of what use was it without the brute force necessary to carry on to a successful end?

The brawn Tom had spoken of so slightingly was what they needed from this time on, and nothing else would save them. Luke had that brawn; Fuller did not. The scientist slipped and nearly lost his balance at the edge of a fissure, but Luke made no move to help him. It was every man for himself at this stage of the game.

INCREASING difficulty came with every step. Now they were sliding and rolling into a deep crater, now scrambling up its steep sides with hands torn and bodies bruised by the jagged boulders. A yawning crevasse opened before them and they were forced to skirt its edge for fully a half mile in the wrong direction before they found a crossing. And the cold was unbelievably intense. Numbed and silent, with their eyes half blinded and lungs seared by the frosty air, they struggled on toward the three pillars of flame.

And still Tom Fuller carried on, though Luke was now in the lead.

They had covered probably half the distance to the flaming columns when shouts arose behind them. The guards were on their trail.

"Can't—find us," Fuller panted. "The mists—"

"Hell, the mists are clearing." Luke snarled. "You ain't so damn smart as you think."

What he said was true. Though there was less light on account of the new angle with the sun farther below the horizon, the red mist was definitely lighter in color, noticeably less dense. Visibility was good to several hundred yards. Luke turned his head, but could see nothing of their pursuers.

"They can't." Fuller insisted weakly.

Luke pushed on with renewed vigor, ignoring him, cursing.

And then there came faintly to his ears the twang of a dart gun: the shrill scream of its deadly vibrating missile; a violent blow that flung him headlong.

LIKE a cat, he bounced to his feet, crouching with Chan Dai's dart gun at his shoulder. A strangely grotesque heap was at his feet—Tom Fuller. Off there in the thinning mist he saw a shadowy figure and he fired at it twice. Whether his darts found their mark he was never to know, for a wall of white swept down suddenly to obscure his vision. Snow! Great massed flakes falling endlessly—the moisture of the mists crystallised and closing in on him to hide him even more safely than had the mists themselves.

He was on his knees then at Fuller's side. A brilliant flash and a screaming roar over amongst the rocks apprised him of the fact that the guard's dart had gone wide. And yet Fuller was down, moaning with pain. Luke tried to turn him over and found that his body had taken on tremendous weight. He was flattened, crushed to the rocky surface of Vulcan by the full force of its gravity!

"What the devil!" he grunted as he heaved and strained. "What'd they do to you, old man?"

With great effort he succeeded in turning the scientist face up. Then he saw what had happened, and knew in a flash that Fuller had saved him from the singing dart whose energy was making a sizzling puddle of the stones where it had landed. The missile, in passing, had carried away the belt and part of the fabric of Tom's garment—carried away the capsule and the radium that energised it. Made the thing worse than useless. And Fuller had done this for him; he had flung himself upon Luke to shove him out of the line of fire . . . risking his own life gladly . . . lucky the deadly dart had missed his body, but . . .

"YOU go on, Fenton," the scientist was whispering through lips that were blue and stiff. "Leave me here. I'm licked. But you can carry on the work; go to my friends and tell them—everything. Tell them what you saw back there—tell them—"

"Shut up!" Luke's words were softly growled. There was a new and utterly unaccountable huskiness in his voice as he straddled the prone body and locked his strong fingers underneath. "You ain't gonna be left behind," he grunted. "We're goin' on, brother, together."

His back straightened and Fuller was swung clear of the ground. His huge biceps tensed and the scrawny scientist was in the air, up and above the bowed head, then let down gently to rest across the broad shoulders of Luke Fenton. Fuller hung there, bent double by the immense weight of him, crushed to painful contact with the taut muscles that carried the strain.

On Earth, Fuller might have tipped the scales at a scant one hundred and thirty pounds; now his sagging body was a load in excess of seven hundredweight. With that load upon him, and gloryin in the

effort it cost, Luke staggered on toward the triple red glow, which, even in the blinding whiteness of the snowfall, marked the location of the columns of fire.

That all feeling had left his limbs in the deep-biting cold meant nothing: that his lungs were near bursting under the terrific strain meant even less. Luke Fenton had found a man. One he would fight for, not against. And, miraculously, he had found himself.

AFTER that there was a blur of interminable torture. Reeling and stumbling, his leg and back muscles shot through with stabbing pain as the frost worked slowly upward, Luke plodded doggedly ahead. An occasional shout came from far behind where the guards still searched the rocky plateau.

Across his great shoulders, Luke's burden was a dead weight, of corpselike rigidity and stillness. Yet Luke clung to it tenaciously, disposing the drooping leaden limbs as comfortably as possible by the judicious spreading of his own brawny arms.

Fuller, he was sure, had not long to live in any event. X. C. had already progressed to such a point that it was hardly possible he could recover. And yet, these smart guys Luke always had detested—the doctors and surgeons and such—they might be able to do something for the poor devil. Anyway, he determined, he'd get the scientist to his friends, dead or alive, and he'd see to it that they treated him right. If they didn't . . .

The red glow was suddenly very bright and a silvery metallic shape loomed up before him in the whiteness. An ethership! Luke tried to call out, but his bellowing voice was gone; only faint gurgling sounds came from his throat. He pushed forward with a savage summoning of his last ounce of energy, and Fuller's weight was that of a mastodon upon him. The curved hull of the vessel was overhead when he slipped and fell to one knee in the thick carpet of snow.

Luke saw them then, a dozen strangers running from the open air-lock of the ship. In uniform, some of them—government officials of Earth and Mars. Damn them, it was a trap!

Knowing vaguely that they had surrounded him, he let Fuller slip from his shoulders and lowered him gently to the snow. Lurching to his feet, he stood swaying above the scientist's body, ready to defend the helpless man against any who came to take him. Defiant curses died in his paralyzed throat as darkness swooped down to blot out all consciousness. His steel-sinewed body, beaten at last, slumped protectingly over the lanky form of his new-found friend.

WHEN Luke next saw the light he stared long and hard at immaculate white walls and ceiling that shut him in. A gentle purring was in his ears and he knew he was in an ethership that was under way. He lay weak and helpless beneath snowy covers, on an iron hospital bed.

There were voices in the room, hushed, awed voices, and Luke moved his head painfully to stare across the room. Fuller, he saw, was stretched on another cot, pale and still. And a white-clad nurse was there, bending over him, talking softly to a doctor. The words that passed between them brought enlightenment to Luke—and more. They brought a new elation, and understanding, and hope.

When the doctor and nurse had left, Luke lay for a long time with his thoughts. There was a man—Tom Fuller. Unafraid, as an agent of a special governmental commit-

tee investigating prison conditions, he had volunteered to get the evidence on Vulcan's Workshop. And he had done it, even though it was almost certain that his own life was to be the price. He had dared the misery and hardship, dared X. C. and the horrible death it brought, that this hellhole of Vulcan might be exposed, that it might be wiped out of existence by government agreement. Vulcan's Workshop, where the gold lust of a certain political clique brought torture and disease and extinction to hapless prisoners who might otherwise be remade into useful members of society by the use of scientific methods—all this was to be no more.

Fuller had succeeded where many others had failed. And Fuller was not to die. Only one of his lungs had been affected by X. C. and this not too extensively to respond to treatment. Many months of careful attendance would be required, and many more months of convalescence. But Fuller, they were sure, would live. Luke gloated.

From what he had heard, Luke gathered that there was to be no trouble about his own pardon. Oddly enough, this gave him no satisfaction. Something had happened to him—inside. For the first time he realised his debt to society and would have preferred that just sentence be carried out upon him. But not in that place, not in Vulcan's Workshop! Luke shuddered.

AND, lying there, he swore a mighty oath that the remainder of his life was to be devoted to entirely different pursuits. It was not too late to face about, not too late to learn. If Fuller would help him, he *would* learn. He had acquired a healthy respect for the book-learning he formerly ridiculed, and he wanted some of it for himself—as much as he could get. His old creed was forgotten, and his bitterness vanished.

"Luke!" At the scientist's husky whisper he turned his head. Fuller was gazing at him with wide, solemn eyes.

"Thanks, Luke," the thin lips murmured.

"Thanks yourself. Where'd we be right now if it wasn't for your radium?"

There was silence as they regarded one another.

"I need you, Luke," Fuller whispered then, "in my laboratory back home. I'll be laid up for a long time, you know, and there's much to be done. Your brawn and my brain—we'll both profit. What do you say to that, Fenton, will you do it?"

Luke grinned. "Will I? Just watch me!"

Then, with a queer lump choking him, Luke looked away. He could think of no words to suit the occasion; he couldn't think at all somehow.

Blissfully, he fell asleep.

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PROLOGUE

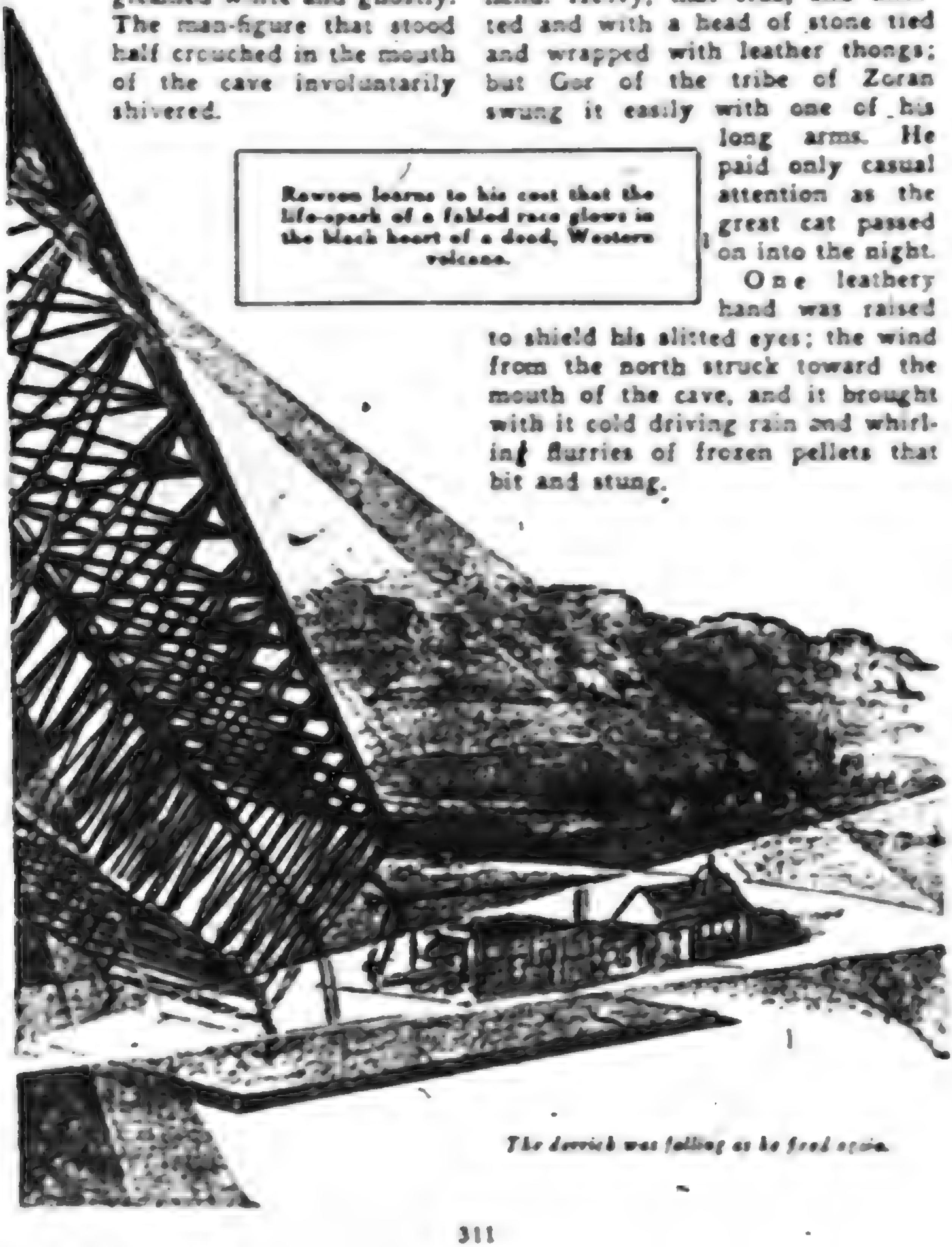
IN the gray darkness the curved fangs of a saber-toothed tiger gleamed white and ghostly. The man-figure that stood half crouched in the mouth of the cave involuntarily shivered.

"Gwanga!" he said. "He goes, too!"

But the man did not move more than to shift a club to his right hand. Heavy, that club, and knotted and with a head of stone tied and wrapped with leather thongs; but Gor of the tribe of Zoran swung it easily with one of his long arms. He paid only casual attention as the great cat passed on into the night.

One leathery hand was raised to shield his slitted eyes; the wind from the north struck toward the mouth of the cave, and it brought with it cold driving rain and whirling flurries of frozen pellets that bit and stung.

Rewem learns to his cost that the life-spark of a fabled race glows in the black heart of a dead Western volcano.



The derrick was falling as he fired again.

Snow! Gor had traveled far, but never had he seen a storm like this with white cold in the air. Again a shiver that was part fear rippled through his muscles and gripped with invisible fingers at his knotted arms.

"The Beast of the North is angry!" he told himself.

Through the dark and storm, animals drifted past before the blasts of cold. They were fleeing; they were full of fear—fear of something that the dull mind of Gor could not picture. But in that mind was the same wordless panic.

Gor, the man-animal of that pre-glacial day, stared wondering, stupidly, into the storm with eyes like those of the wild pig. His arms were long, almost to his knees; his hair, coarse and matted, hung in greasy locks about his savage face. Behind his low, retreating forehead was place for little of thought or reason. Yet Gor was a man, and he met the threat of disaster by something better than blind, terrified, animal flight.

A scant hundred in the tribe—men and women and little pot-bellied brown children—Gor gathered them together in the cave far back from the mouth.

"For many moons," he told them by words and signs, "the fear has been upon us. There have been signs for us to see and for all the Four-feet—for Hathor, the great, and for little Wahti in his hole in the sand-hill. Hathor has swung his long snout above his curved tusks and has cried his fear, and the Eaters of the Dead have circled above him and cried *their* cry.

"And now the Sun-god does not warm us. He has gone to hide behind the clouds. He is afraid—afraid of the cold monster that blows white stinging things in his breath.

"The Sun-god is gone—now, when he should be making hot summer! The Four-feet are going. Even Gwanga, the long-toothed, puts his tail between his legs and runs from the cold."

THE naked bodies shivered in the chill that struck in from the storm-wrapped world; they drew closer their coverings of fur and hides. The light of their flickering fires played strange tricks with their savage faces to make them still uglier and to show the dull terror that gripped them.

"Run—we must run—run away—the breath of the beast is on us—he follows close—run...." Through the mutterings and growls a sick child whimpered once, then was still. Gor was speaking again:

"Run! Run away!" he mocked them. "And where shall the tribe of Zora go? With Gwanga, to make food for his cat belly or to be hammered to death with the stones of the great tribes of the south?"

There was none to reply—only a despairing moan from ugly lips. Gor waited, then answered his own question.

"No!" he shouted, and beat upon his hairy chest that was round as the trunk of a tree. "Gor will save you—Gor, the wanderer! You named me well: my feet have traveled far. Beyond the red-topped mountains of the north I have gone: I have seen the tribes of the south, and I brought you a head for proof. I have followed the sun, and I have gone where it rises."

In the half light, coarse strands of hair waved as hideous heads were nodded in confirmation of the boast, though many still drooped despairingly.

"If Gor leads, where will he go?" a voice demanded.

Another growled: "Gor's feet have gone far: where have they gone where the Beast cannot follow our scent?"

"Down!" said Gor with unex-

acious dramatic effect, and he pointed at the rocky door of the cave. "I have gone where even the Beast of the North cannot go. The caves back of this you have seen, but only Gor has seen the hole—the hole where a strong man can climb down; a hole too small for the great beast to get through. Gor has gone down to find more caves below and more caves below them.

"Far down is a place where it is always warm. There is water in lakes and streams. Gor has caught fish in that water, and they were good. There are growing things like the round earth-plants that come in the night, and they, too, were good.

"Will you follow Gor?" he demanded. "And when the Beast is gone and the Sun-god comes back again we will return—"

THE blast that found its way inside the cave furnished its own answer; the echoing, "We follow! We follow" spoken through chattering teeth was not needed. The women of the tribe shivered more from the cold than from fear as they gathered together their belongings, their furs and hides and crude stone implements; and the shambling man-shape, called Gor, led them to the hole down which a strong man might climb, led them down and still down. . . .

But, as to the rest—Gor's promise of safe return to the light of day and that outer world where the Sun-god shone—how was Gor to know that a mighty glacier would lock the whole land in ice for endless years, and, retreating, leave their upper caves filled and buried under a valley heaped with granite rocks?

Even had the way been open to the land above, Gor himself could never have known when that ice-sheet left. For when that day came and once more the Sun-god drew steamy spirals from the drenched and thawing ground, Gor, deep down in the earth, had been dead for countless years. Only the remote descendants of that earlier tribe now lived in their subterranean home, though even with them there were some who spoke at times of those legends of another world which their ancestors had left.

And through the long centuries, while evolution worked its slow changes, they knew nothing of the vanishing ice, of the sun and the gushing waters, the grass and forests that came to cover the earth. Nor did their descendants, exploring interminable caves, learning to tame the internal fires, always evolving, always growing, have any remote conception of a people who sailed strange seas to find new lands and live and multiply and build up a country of sky-reaching cities and peaceful farmlands, of sunlit valleys and hills.

But always there were adventurous souls who made their way deeper and deeper into the earth; and among them in every generation was one named Gor who taught the tribal legends and who led the adventurers on. But legends have a trick of changing, and instead of searching upward, it was through the deeper strata that they made their slow way in their search for a mystic god and the land of their fathers' fathers. . . .

CHAPTER I

A Man Named Smith

HEAT! Heat of a white-hot sun only two hours old. Heat of blazing sands where shimmering, glassy waves made the sparse sagebrush seem about to burst into flames. Heat of a wind that might have come out of the fire-box of a Mogul on an upgrade pull.

A highway twisted among black

masses of outcropping lava rock or tightened into a straightaway for miles across the desert that swept up to the mountain's base. The asphalt surface of the pavement was almost liquid; it clung stickily to the tires of a big car, letting go with a continuous, ripping sound.

Behind the wheel of the weather-beaten, sunburned car, Dean Rawson squinted his eyes against the glare. His lean, tanned face was almost as brown as his hair. The sun had done its work there; it had set crinkly lines about the man's eyes of darker brown. But the deeper lines in that young face had been etched by responsibility; they made the man seem older than his twenty-three years, until the steady eyes, flashing into quick amusement, gave them the lie.

And now Rawson's lips twisted into a little grin at his own discomfort—but he knew the desert driver's trick.

"A hundred plus in the shade," he reasoned silently. "That's hot any way you take it. But taking it in the face at forty-five an hour is too much like looking into a Bessemer converter!"

He closed the windows of his old coupé to within an inch of the top, then opened the windshield a scant half inch. The blast that had been drawing the moisture from his body became a gently circulating current of hot air.

He had gone only another ten miles after these preparations for fast driving, when he eased the big, weatherbeaten car to a stop

ON his right, reaching up to the cool heights under a cloudless blue sky, the gray peaks of the Sierras gave promise of relief from the furnace breath of the desert floor. There were even valleys of snow glistening whitely where the mountains held them high. A watcher, had there been one to observe in the empty land, might have understood another traveler's pausing to admire the serene majesty of those heights—but he would have wondered could he have seen Rawson's eyes turned in longing away from the mountains while he stared across the forbidding sands.

There were other mountains, lavender and gray, in the distance. And nearer by, a matter of twenty or thirty elusive miles through the dancing waves of hot air, were other barren slopes. Across the rolling sand-hills wheel marks, faint and wind-blown, led straight from the highway toward the parched peaks.

"Tonah Basin" Rawson was thinking. "It's there inside those hills. It's hotter than this is by twenty degrees right this minute—but I wish I could see it. I'd like to have one more look before I face that hard-boiled bunch in the city!"

He looked at his watch and shook his head. "Not a chance," he admitted. "I'm due up in Erickson's office in five hours. I wonder if I've got a chance with them . . ."

FIVE hours of driving, and Rawson walked into the office of Erickson, Incorporated, with a steady step. Another hour, and his tanned face had gone a trifle pale; his lips were set grimly in a straight line that would not relax under the verdict he felt certain he was about to hear.

For an hour he had faced the steely-eyed man across the long table in the Directors' Room—faced him and replied to questions from this man and the half-dozen others seated there. Skeptical questions, tricky questions; and now the man was speaking:

"Rawson, six months ago you laid your Tonah Basin plans before us—plans to get power from the center of the Earth, to utilize that energy, and to control the power

situation in this whole Southwest. It looked like a wild gamble then, but we investigated. It still looks like a gamble."

"Yes," said Rawson, "it is a gamble. Did I ever call it anything else?"

"The Ehrmann oscillator," the man continued imperturbably, "invented in 1940, two years ago, solves the wireless transmission problem, but the success of your plan depends upon your own invention—upon your straight-line drills that you say will not wander off at a tangent when they get down a few miles. And more than that, it depends upon you

"Even that does not damn the scheme; but, Rawson, there's only one factor we gamble on. No wild plans, no matter how many hundreds of millions they promise: no machines, no matter what they are designed to do, get a dollar of our backing. It's men we back with our money!"

Rawson's face was set to show no emotion, but within his mind were insistent, clamoring thoughts:

"Why can't he say it and get it over with? I've lost—what a hard-boiled bunch they are!—but he doesn't need to drag out the agony." But—but what was the man saying?

"Men, Rawson!" the emotionless voice continued. "And we've checked up on you from the time you took your nourishment out of a bottle; it's you we're backing. That's why we have organized the little company of Thermal Explorations, Limited. That's why we've put a million of hard coin into it. That's why we've put you in charge of operations."

He was extending a hand that Dean Rawson had to reach for blindly.

"I'd drill through to hell," Dean said, and fought to keep his voice steady, "with backing like that!"

He allowed his emotion to express itself in a shaky laugh. "Perhaps I will at that," he added: "I'll certainly be heading in the right direction."

UNDER another day's sun the hot asphalt was again taking the print of the tires of Rawson's old car. But this time, when he came to the almost obliterated marks that led through the sand toward distant mountains, he stopped, partially deflated the tires to give them a grip on the sand, and swung off.

"A fool, kid trick," he admitted to himself, "but I want to see the place. I'll see plenty of it before I'm through, but right now I've got to have a look; then I'll buckle down to work.

"Thermal Explorations, Limited!" The name rang triumphantly in his mind. "A million things to do—men, crews for the drills, derricks. . . . We'll have to truck in over this road: I'll lay a plank road over the sand. And water—we'll have to haul that, too, until we can sink a well. We'll find water under there somewhere. I've got to see the place. . . ."

The black sides of the mountains were nearer: every outcropping rock was plainly volcanic, and great sweeping slopes were beds of ash and pumice; the wheel marks, where they showed at all, wound off and into a canyon hidden in the tremendous hills that thrust themselves abruptly from the desert floor.

The mountains themselves towered hugely at closer range, but the road that Rawson followed climbed through them without traversing the highest slopes. It was scarcely more than a trail, barely wide enough for the car at times, but boulder-filled gullies showed where the hands of men had worked to build it.

HE came at last into the open where a shoulder of rock beat the road outward above a sea of sand far below. And now the mountains showed their circular arrangement—a great ring, twenty miles across. At one side were three conical peaks, unmistakable craters, whose scarred sides were smothered under ash and sand that had rained down from their shattered tops in ages past. Yet, so hot they were, so clear-cut the irregularly rimmed cups at their tops, that they seemed to have pushed themselves up through the earth in that very instant. At their bases were signs of human habitation—broken walls, scattered stone buildings whose empty windows gaped blackly. This was all that remained of New Rhyolite.

Rawson looked at the "ghost town" which had never failed to interest him, but he gave no thought now to the hardy prospectors who had built it or to the vein of gold that had failed them. His searching eyes came back to the fiery pit, the Tonah Basin, a vast cauldron of sand and ash—great sweeps of yellow and gray and darker brown into which the sun was pouring its rays with burning-glass fierceness.

But to Rawson, there was more than the eye could see. He was picturing a great powerhouse, steel derricks, capped pipes that led off to whirring turbines, generators, strings of cables stretching out on steel supports into the distance, a wireless transmitter—and all of this the result of his own vision, of the stream he would bring from deep in the earth!

Then, abruptly, the pictures faded. Far below him on the yellow, sun-blasted floor, a fleck of shadow had moved. It appeared suddenly from the sand, moved erratically, staggeringly, for a hundred feet, then vanished as if something had blotted it out—and Dean Rawson knew that it was the shadow of a man.

THE road widened beyond the turn. He had intended to swing around; he had wanted only to take a clear picture of the place with him. But now the big car's gears wailed as he took the downgrade in second, and the brakes, jammed on at the sharp curves, added their voice to the chorus of haste.

"Confounded desert rats!" Rawson was saying under his breath. "They'll chance anything—but imagine crossing country like that! And he hasn't a burro—he's got only the water he can carry in a canteen!"

But even the canteen was empty, he found, when he stopped the car in a whirl of loose sand beside a prone figure whose khaki clothes were almost indistinguishable against the desert soil.

Before Rawson could get his own lanky six feet of wiry length from the car, the man had struggled to his feet. Again the little blot of shadow began its wavering, uncertain, forward movement.

He was a little shorter than Rawson, a little heavier of build, and younger by a year or two, although his flushed face and a two days' stubble of black beard might have been misleading. Rawson caught the staggering man and half carried him to the shadow of the car, the only shelter in that whole vast cauldron of the sun.

From a mouth where a swollen tongue protruded thickly came an agonized sound that was a cry for. "Water—water!" Rawson gave it to him as rapidly as he dared, until he allowed the man to drink from the desert bag at the last. And his keen eyes were taking in all the significant details as he worked.

The khaki clothes earned a nod of silent approval. The compact

roll that had been slung from the younger man's shoulders, even the broad shoulders themselves, and the square jaw, unshaved and grimy, got Rawson's inaudible, "O. K.!" But the face was more burned than tanned.

HE introduced himself when the stranger was able to stand. "I'm Rawson, Dean Rawson, mining engineer when I'm working at it," he explained. "I'm bound north. I'll take you out of this. You can travel with me as far as you please."

The dark-haired youngster was plainly youthful now, as he stood erect. His voice was recovering what must have been its usual hearty ring.

"I'm not trying to say 'thank you,'" he said, as he took Rawson's hand. "I was sure sunk—going down for the last time—tape—all that sort of thing! You pulled me out—the good old helping hand. Can't thank a fellow for that—just return the favor or pass it on to someone else. And, by the way—you won't believe it—but my name is Smith."

Rawson smiled good-naturedly. "No," he agreed, "I don't believe it. But it's a good, handy name. All right, Smithy, jump in! Here, let me give you a lift; you're still woozy."

Rawson found his passenger uncommunicative. Not but what Smithy talked freely of everything but himself, but it was of himself that Rawson wanted to know.

"Drop me at the first town," said Smithy. "You're going north; I'm south-bound—looking for a job down in Los. I won't take any more short cuts; I was two days on this last one. I'll stick to the road."

They were through the mountains that ringed in the fiery pit of Tonah Basin. Smooth sand lay ahead; only the shallow marks that his own tires had ploughed needed to be followed. Dean Rawson turned and looked with fair appraisal at the man he had saved.

"Drifter?" he asked himself silently. "Road bum? He doesn't look the part; there's something about him. . . ."

Aloud he inquired: "What's your line? What do you know?"

And the young man answered frankly: "Not a thing!"

DEAN sensed failure, inefficiency. He resented it in this youngster who had fought so gamely with death. His voice was harsh with a curious sense of his own disappointment as he asked:

"Found the going too hard for you up north, did you? Well, it won't be any easier—" But Smithy had interrupted with a weak movement of his hand.

"Not too hard," he said laconically; "too damn soft! I don't know what I'm looking for—pretty dumb: got a lot to learn!—but it'll be a job that needs to take a good licking!"

"Too damn soft!" Dean was thinking. "And he tackled the desert alone!" There was a lot here he did not understand. But the look in the eyes of Smithy that met his own searching gaze and returned it squarely if a bit whimsically—that was something he *could* understand. Dean Rawson was a judge of men. The sudden impulse that moved him was founded upon certainty.

"You've found that job," he said. "The desert almost got you a little while ago—now it's due to take that licking you were talking about. I'm going to teach it to lie down and roll over and jump through hoops. Fact is, my job is to get it into harness and put it to work. I'll be working right out there in the Basin where I found you. It will be only about two degrees cooler

than hell. If that sounds good to you, Smithy, stick around."

He warmed oddly to the look in the younger man's deep-set, dark eyes, as Smithy replied:

"Try to put me out, Rawson—just try to put me out!"

CHAPTER II

Gold!

"Ten miles down, drillers!
Hell-bound, and proud of it!
Ten miles down, drillers!
Hark to what I say:
You're pokin' through the crust
of hell
And braggin' too damn loud of
it,
For, when you get to hell,
you'll find
The devil there to pay."

FROM the black, night-wrapped valley, far below, the singer's voice went silent with the slamming of a door in one of the bunkhouses. The song was popular; some rimester in the Tonah Basin camp had written the parody for the tormenting of the drill crews. And, high on the mountainside, Dean Rawson hummed a few bars of the lilting air after the singer's voice had ceased.

"Ten miles down!" he said at last to his assistant, sprawled out on the stone beside him. "That's about right, Smithy. And maybe the rest of the doggerel isn't so far off either. 'Pokin' through the crust of hell'—well, there was hell popping around here once, and I am gambling that the furnaces aren't all out."

They were on the outthrust shoulder of rock where the mountain road hung high above the valley floor. Below, where, months before, Rawson had rescued a man from desert death, was blackness punctured by points of light—bunkhouse windows, the drilling-floor lights at the foot of a big derrick, a single warning light at the derrick's top. But the buildings and the towering steelwork of the derrick that handled the rotary drills were dim and ghostly in the light of the stars.

"We've gone through some places I'd call plenty warm," said Smithy, "but you—you craves it *hot!* Think we're about due?" he asked.

Rawson answered indirectly.

"One great big old fire-crater!" he said. His outstretched arm swept the whole circle of starlit mountains that enclosed the Basin. "That's what this was once. Twenty miles across—and when it blew its head off it must have sprayed this whole Southwest.

"Now, those craters"—he pointed contemptuously toward the three conical peaks off to the right—"those were just blow-holes on the side of this big one."

IN the ragged ring of mountains, the throat of some volcanic monster of an earlier age, the three cones towered hugely. Their tops were plainly cupped; their ashy sloping sides swept down to the desert floor. At their base, the gray walls of stone in the ghost town of Little Rhyolite gleamed palely, like skeleton remains.

"I've seen steam, live steam," Rawson went on, "coming out of a fissure in the rocks. I know there's heat and plenty of it down below. We're about due to hit it. The boys are pulling the drill now; they cut through into a whale of a cave down below there—"

He broke off abruptly to fix his attention on the dark valley below, where lights were moving. One white slash of brilliance cut across the dark ground; another, then a cluster of flood lights blared out. They picked the skeleton framework of the giant derrick in black relief against the white glare

of the sand. From far below, through the quiet air, came sounds of excited shouting; the voices of men were raised in sudden clamor.

"They've pulled the drill," said Rawson. "But why all the excitement?"

He had already turned toward their car when the crackle of six quick shots came from below. His abrupt command was not needed; Smithy was in the car while still the echoes were rolling off among the hills. Their own lights flashed on to show the mountain grade waiting for their quick descent.

THE sandy floor of this part of the Tonah Basin was littered with the orderly disorder of a big construction job—mountains of casing, tubular drill rod, a foot in diameter; segmental bearings to clamp around the rod every hundred feet and give it smooth play. Dean drove his car swiftly along the surfaced road that was known as "Main Street" to the entire camp.

There were men running toward the derrick—men of the day shift who had been aroused from their sleep. Others were clustered about the wide concrete floor where the derrick stood. Clad only in trousers and shoes, their bodies, tanned by the desert sun, were almost black in the glare of the big floods. They milled wildly about the derrick; and, through all their clamor and shouting, one word was repeated again and again:

"Gold! Gold! Gold!"

The big drill head was suspended above the floor. Dean Rawson, with Smithy close at hand, pushed through the crowd. He was prepared to see traces of gold in the sludge that was bailed out through the hollow shaft—quartz, perhaps, whose richness had set the men wild before they realized how impossible it would be to develop such a mine. But Rawson stopped almost aghast as the glaring splendor of the golden drill hanging naked in the blinding light.

RILEY, foreman of the night shift, was standing beside it, a pistol in his hand. "L'ave it be," he was commanding. "Not a hand do ye lay on it till the boss gets here." At sight of Rawson he stepped forward.

"I shot in the air," he explained. "I knew ye were up in the hills for a breath of coolness. I wanted to get ye here quick."

"Right," said Rawson tersely. "But, man, what have you done with the drill? It's smeared over with gold!"

"Fair clogged wid it, sir," Riley's voice betrayed his own excitement. "You remember we couldn't pull it at first—the drill was jammed-like after it brak through at the ten-mile livil. Then it come free—and luk at it! Lok at the dern thing! Sent down for honest work, it was, and it comes back all dressed up in jewelry like a squaw Indian whin there's oil struck on the reservation! Or is it gold ye were after all the time?" he demanded.

"Gold! Gold!" a hundred voices were shouting. Dean hardly heard the voice of the foreman, made suddenly garrulous with excitement. He stared at the big drill head, heaped high with the precious metal. It was jammed into the diamond-studded face of the drill; it filled every crack and crevice, a smooth, solid mass on top of the head and against the stem. A workman had brought a singlejack and chisel; he was prying at a ribbon of the yellow stuff. Riley went for him, gun in hand.

"L'ave it be!" he shouted.

"But, confound it all, Dean," Smithy's voice was saying in a tone of disgust, "I thought we were working on a power plant. Not that

a gold mine is so bad; but we can't work it—we can't go down after it at ten miles."

"Gold mine!" Rawson echoed. "I'll say it's a gold mine—but not because of the gold. Do you notice anything peculiar about that, Smithy?"

His assistant replied with a quick exclamation:

"You're right, Dean! I knew there was something haywire with that. Solid chunk—been cast around that stem—melted on. And that means—"

"Heat," said Rawson. "It means we've found what we're after. Give the gold to the men; tell them we'll divide it evenly among them. There's more down there, but there's something better: there's energy, power!"

He snapped out quick orders. "Get the temperature. Drop a recording pyrometer. Let me know at once. There'll be plenty doing now!"

DRILL rods and cables, all were made of the newest aluminum alloy. The long tube that held the pyrometer was formed of the same metal. Smithy sent it down to get a recording of the temperatures of that subterranean cave into which their tools had plunged.

He adjusted the recording mechanism himself and stood beside the twenty-inch casing that held back the loose sand from the big bore. Then he watched ten sections of cable, each a mile in length, each heavier than the last, as they went hissing into the earth.

From the cable control shed the voice of Riley was calling the depth.

"Fifty-two thousand." Then by hundreds until he cried: "Fifty-two-seven. We're into the big cave! Now another hundred feet."

The cable was moving slowly. In the middle of Riley's call of "Fifty-two-eight," a jangling bell told that the bottom of the pyrometer carrier had touched.

"Up with it," Smithy ordered. "Make it snappy. We'll see if we've got another cargo of gold."

There was an undeniable thrill in this reaching to a tremendous distance underground, this groping about in a deep-hidden cave, where molten gold was to be found. What had they tapped?—he asked himself. He saw visions of some vast pool of hot, liquid gold. Perhaps Dean would have to change his plans. They could rig up some kind of a bailer; they could bring out thousands of dollars at a time.

He was watching for the first sight of the metal carrier, far more interested in what might be clinging to it than in the record of the pyrometer it held. He saw it emerge—then he stared in disbelief at the stubby mass at the cable's end, where all that remained of the long tube he had sent down was a dangling two feet of discolored metal, warped and distorted. The lower part, a full twenty feet in length, had been fused cleanly off.

Dean Rawson was there to watch the next attempt. Again Riley's roaring bass rolled out the count, but this time the call stopped at fifty-two-seven. The jangling bell told that the carrier had touched.

"Divil a bit do I understand this," Riley was calling. "We're right at the point where we dropped through into the clear. Right at the roof of the big cave—fifty-two-seven, it says—and no lower do we go. The bottom of the hole is plugged!"

RAWSON made no reply. He was scowling while he stared speculatively at the mouth of the twenty-inch bore—a vertical tunnel that led from the drilling floor down, down to some inner vault. "Molten gold," he was thinking. "It melted a cylinder of the new Krie-

ger alloy—melted it when its melting point is way higher than that of any rock that we've hit. And now the bore is closed. . . ."

He was trying vainly to project his mental vision through those miles of hard rock to see what manner of mystery this was into which he had probed. He shook his head slowly in baffled speculation, then spoke sharply.

"Drill it out!" he ordered. "We're into a hot spot sure enough, though I can't just figure out the how of it. But we'll tame it, Smithy. Send down the drill. Clean it out. Then we'll poke around down there and get the answer to all this."

Five days were needed to send down the big drill with a new drill-head replacing the other too fouled with gold for any use. The tubular sections, a hundred feet in length, were hooked together and lowered one by one. Each joint meant the coupling of the air-pipe as well. Air, mixed with water from the outer jacket, must come foaming up through the central core to bring the powdered rock to the surface.

Five days, then one hour of boring, and another five days to pull out the drill before Rawson could hope for his answer. But he found it in the severed shaft of the great drill where the head had been melted completely off. The big stem that would have resisted all but electric furnace heat, and been cut through like a tallow candle in the blast of an oxy-acetylene flame.

CHAPTER III

Red Drops

THE flat-roofed shack of yellow boards that was Dean Rawson's "office" had a second canopy roof built above it and extending out on all sides like a wooden umbrella. Thick pitch fried almost audibly from the fir boards when the sun drove straight from overhead, but beneath their shelter the heat was more bearable.

By an open window, where a hot breeze stirred sluggishly, Rawson sat in silent contemplation of the camp. His face was as copper-colored as an Apache's and as motionless. His eyes were fixed unwaveringly upon a distant derrick and the blasted stub of a big drill that hung unmoving above the concrete floor.

But the man's eyes did not consciously record the details of that scene. He saw nothing of the derrick or of the heat waves that made the steel seem writhingly alive; he was looking at something far more distant, something many miles away, something vague and mysterious, hidden miles beneath the surface of the earth.

"Heat," he said at last, as if talking in a dream. "Heat, terrific temperatures—but I can't make it out; I can't see it!"

The younger, broad-shouldered man, whose khaki shirt, thrown open at the neck showed a chest tanned to the black-brown of his face, stopped his restless pacing back and forth in the hot room.

"Yes?" he asked with a touch of irritation in his tone. "There's plenty of heat there—heat enough to melt off the shaft of that high-temp alloy! What the devil's the use of wondering about the heat, Dean? What get's me is this: the shaft has been plugged again. Now, what kind of. . . ."

DEAN RAWSON'S face had not moved a muscle during the other's outburst. His eyes were still fixed on that place that was so far away, yet which he tried to bring close in his mind, close enough to see, to comprehend the mystery that should be so plain.

"Lava wouldn't do it!" he said softly. "No melted stone would melt the Krieger alloy, unless it was under pressure, which this was not.

There was no blast coming out of our shaft. Yet we dipped into that gold; we stuck the drill right down into it. But what did we go into the next time? What did we dip into?"

He swung quickly, violently, toward Smithy who was facing him from the middle of the room. He aimed one finger at him as if it were a pistol, and his words cracked out as sharply as if they came from a gun:

"That tube you sent down—that piece of casing! How was it burned? Were there straggling ends, frozen gobs of metal? Did it look like an old-fashioned molasses candy bar that's been melted? Did it?"

"Why, no," said Smithy. "It hadn't dripped any; it was cut off nice and clean."

"Cut!" Rawson almost shouted the word. "You said it, Smithy. So was the shaft of the drill. And if you ever saw a piece of this alloy being melted you know that it's as gummy as a pot of old paint. It was cut, Smithy! Dipping into that melted gold threw us off the track; we were thinking of ramming the drill down into a mess of lava. But we didn't. It was cut off by a blast of flame so much hotter than lava that melted rock would seem cold!"

"And that helps us a lot, doesn't it," asked Smithy, scornfully, "when the flame melts the end of the shaft shut as fast as we open it?"

Dean Rawson's lean, muscular hands took Smithy's broad shoulders and spun the younger man around. "Cheer up," Dean told him. "We've got it licked. Why it doesn't blow out of that shaft like hell out for noon is more than I can see: but the heat's there! We've won!"

"But—" Smithy began. Rawson sent him spinning toward the door in a good-natured showing of strength that his assistant had not yet guessed.

"Soup!" he ordered. "Break out the nitroglycerine, Smithy. Get that Swede, Hanson, on the job; he's a shooter. He knows his stuff. We'll blow open the bottom end of our shaft so it'll never go shut!"

HANSON knew his stuff and did it. But he met Rawson's inquiring eyes with a puzzled shake of his head when the open mouth of the twenty-inch bore gave faint echo of the deep explosion and followed after a time with only a feeble puff of air.

"Like a cannon, she should have gone," Hanson stated. "And she yoost go *phht!*"

"It's open down below," said Rawson briefly. "This is a different kind of a well from the kind you've been shooting."

To the waiting Riley he said: "Hook a bailer onto that cable and send it down. See what you can tell about the hole."

Again ten miles of cable hissed smoothly down the gaping throat. Then it slowed.

"Fifty-two-seven," said Riley, "and she's open. Seven twenty-five! Seven fifty, and we're on bottom!"

"Up," Rawson ordered, "if there's anything left of the bailer. It's probably melted into scrap."

But strangely it was not. It hung from the dangling cable spinning lazily until Riley stepped in to check its motion.

There was a check valve in the bottom—a door that opened inwardly, to take in water and fragments of rock when need arose. Riley, disregarding the possible heat of the twirling bailer, reached for it with bare hands. He drew them back, then held them before him—and a hundred watching eyes saw what had been unseen before: the slow dropping of red liquid from the bailer's end. The same drops

were falling from Riley's hands that had touched that end.

"Blood!" The word came from the foreman's throat in one horrified gasp. It ran in a whispering echo from one to another of the watching crew. From far across the hot sands came the rattle of a truck that brought the first of many loads of cement and steel for Rawson's buildings. Its driver was singing lustily:

"Hark to what I say:
You're pokin' through the crust
of hell
And braggin' too damn loud of
it,
For, when you get to hell,
you'll find
The devil there to pay!"

But Rawson, looking daredly into Smithy's eyes, said only: "It's cold—the bailer's cold. There's no heat there."

CHAPTER IV

The Light in the Crater

"OF course it wasn't blood!" said Smithy explosively. "But try to tell the men that. See how far you get. 'Devils!' That's been their talk since yesterday when Riley got smeared up—and now that the bailer's gone we can't prove a thing."

Again he was pacing restlessly back and forth in the little board shack that was Rawson's field headquarters. Rawson, seated by the window, was looking at tables of comparative melting points. He glanced up sharply.

"You haven't found it yet?" he questioned. "A forty-foot bailer! Now that's a nice easy little thing to mislay."

Riley had followed the excited Smithy into the room; he stood silently by the door until he caught Rawson's questioning glance.

"Forty feet or forty inches," he said, "'tis gone! 'Twas there by the derrick last night, and this marnin'—"

"That's fine," Rawson interrupted with heavy sarcasm. "I haven't enough down below ground to keep my mind occupied—I need a few mysteries up top. Now do you really expect me to believe that a thing like that bailer has been carried off?"

This time it was Smithy who interrupted. "You can just practise believing on that, Dean," he said. "When you get so you can believe a forty-foot bailer can vanish into thin air, then you'll be ready for what I've got. This is what I came in to tell you: that one truckload of steel grillage beams for the turbine footings—they were put out where we surveyed for the first power house—dumped on the sand. . . ."

"Well?" questioned Rawson, as Smithy paused. His look was daring Smithy to say what he knew was coming.

"Five tons of steel beams," said Smithy softly, "gone—just like that! Just a hollow in the sand!"

THE big figure of the Irish foreman was still beside the door. Rawson saw one clumsy hand make the sign of the Cross; then Riley held that hand before him and stared at it in horror. "Divils' blood," he whispered. "And I dipped my hands in it. Saints protect us all!"

"That will be all of that!" Dean Rawson's usually quiet voice was as full of crackling emphasis as if it had been charged with electrical energy. "If anyone thinks that I have gone this far, just to be scared out by some dirty sabotage. . . .

"I see it all. I don't know how they did it, but it's all come since the gold was found. Someone else wants it. They think they can scare

off the men, maybe take a pot-shot at me, come back here and clean up later on, pull up gold by the pailful, I suppose—"

Riley leaped forward and banged his big fist down on the table. "Right ye are!" he shouted, until loitering men in the open "street" outside stared curiously. "Divils they are, but they're the kind of divils we know how to handle. And now I'll tell ye somethin' else, sir: I know where they are hidin'.

"There was no work for anyone last night, but I'm used to bein' up. I couldn't sleep. I was wanderin' around, thinkin' of nothin' at all out of the way, and I thought I saw some shadows, like it might be men, way off on the sand. Then later over to the old ghost town, d'ye mind! I saw a light, a queer, green sort of light. Sure, a fool I was callin' meself at the time, but now I believe it."

DEAN RAWSON had crossed the room while the man was still speaking. He dragged a wooden case from beneath his cot and smashed at the lid with a wrecking bar. Then he reached inside and drew forth a blue-black .45.

He tossed the pistol to Riley. "Know how to use one of these?" he asked. The manner in which the big Irishman snapped open the side ejection was sufficient answer. Dean handed another gun to Smithy, then pulled out more and laid them on his cot together with a little pile of cartridge boxes.

"You're all right, Riley," he said. "Just keep your head. Don't let your damned superstitions run away with you, and I wouldn't ask for a better man to stand alongside of in a scrap."

The foreman beamed with pleasure; Rawson went on in crisp sentences:

"Take these guns. Take plenty of ammunition. Pick five or six men you know you can depend on. Mount guard around this camp tonight. I'll post an order saying you're in charge—and I'm telling you now to use those guns on anything you see.

"Smithy," he said to the other man who had been quietly listening, "you and I are going to start for town. Only Riley will know that we're gone for the night. We'll have a little listening post of our own up here in the hills."

But Rawson postponed their going. More material was arriving; one casting in particular needed all the men and Rawson's supervision to place it on the sand where an erection crew could swing it into place at some later date. And then, when he and Smithy had driven away from camp with the distant city as their announced destination, Rawson still did not go directly to the mountain grade. He swung off instead where rolling sandhills blocked all view from the camp, and he headed the car into a gusty wind that brought whirling clouds of dust; they almost obscured the crumbling walls at the volcano's base.

The ghost towns that are found here and there in the forsaken wilderness of the West are depressing to one who walks their empty streets. Little Rhyolite was no exception. In gray, ghostly walls, empty windows stared steadily, disconcertingly like sockets of dead eyes in battered, weather-beaten skulls.

DEAN and Smithy walked among the roofless ruins. Lizards, the color of the cold, gray walls, slipped from sight on silent, clinging feet. Once a sidewinder, almost invisible against the sand, looped away from the intruders with smooth deliberation.

"No marks here," said Rawson at last. "Even an Indian can't read

dge in this sahy sand when the wind has dusted it off."

He turned his head from a whirl of face sah where the wind, sweeping around a wall of stone, was scouring at a sand dune's sloping side.

"Dean," said Smithy, "old Riley may have been looking for beacheee when he saw these lights. Superstitious old cuss, Riley! Maybe there wasn't anything here. But, Dean, there's some confoundedly funny things happening around here."

"Are you telling me!" Rawson asked grimly. "But we want to remember one thing," he added: "We've punched a hole in the ground, and we've got into a place that is hot enough to melt Krieger alloy one minute and is stone cold the next That's disturbing enough, but we don't want to get that mixed up with what's happening up top. There's dirty work going on—"

He stopped. His eyes, that had never ceased to search for some mark of special meaning, had come to rest upon an object half hidden in the sand. He stooped and picked it up.

"Now what the devil is this?" Smithy began. But Rawson was staring at the smooth lava block that was in his hand. It was tapered; it was pierced through with a straight, smooth hole, and its base was round and ringed as if it had been held in a clamp

"That," he said at last, "was brought in from outside. Outside, Smithy—get that."

DEAN RAWSON'S face was wreathed in a sudden smile of pure pleasure. "No, I don't know what the darn thing is," he admitted. "And I don't care But I know that someone, or some bunch of someones—outsiders—are trying to horn in. I might even go so far as to say that I suspect the power monopoly gentlemen. I think they have started in on us, plan to run off our men, interfere in every way and drive me out of the field with the boring a failure. Smithy, I begin to think I'm going to enjoy this job!"

Again the hot wind, only beginning to cool with the setting of the sun, swept around the building where they stood and tore at the hill of sand. "Come on," said Rawson. "It's getting dark. We'll get up to our lookout—"

"Hold on!" called Smithy sharply.

Rawson turned. Smithy was rubbing his eyes when the whirl of wind-borne sand had passed; he was staring at the sand dunes.

"I'm seeing things, I guess," he said. "I thought for a minute there was a hole there, and the sand was slipping. I'm getting as bad as Riley."

The two went back through the gathering shadows to their waiting car. And Smithy's involuntary shiver told Rawson that he was not the only one to feel a sense of relief at the sound of the exhaust as their car took them away from the dead bones of a dead city in a barren, trackless waste.

THE shoulder of rock, where the mountain road swung out, gave a comprehensive view of camp and desert and the encircling mountains. Above in a vault of black was the dazzling array of stars as the desert lands know them: so low they were, the ragged, broken tops of the three ancient craters seemed touching the warm velvet of the sky on which the stars were hung. Beyond their smooth slopes a spreading glow gave promise of the rising moon.

Rawson headed the car downgrade in readiness for a quick return; he ran it close to the inner wall of rock out of which the road

had been carved, then seated himself on the outer rim without thought of the thousand-foot sheer drop beneath his dangling legs. With a glass he was sweeping the foreground where the scattered lights of the camp were like vagrant reflections of the stars thrown back to them from the dead sea of sand.

"Riley's on the job," he told Smithy when he passed over the glass later on. "And I've got my pocket portable." He took the little radio receiver from his pocket as he spoke. "Riley will signal me from my office if he sees anything."

The moon had cleared the mountains; its flood of light poured across their rugged heights and filled the bowl of Tonah Basin as some master of a great theatrical switchboard might have flooded a dark stage with magic illumination, half concealing, transforming whatever things it touched.

All the hard brilliance of sunlit sands was gone. The rolling dunes were softly mellow; the more distant mountains were dream-peaks. Half real, they seemed, and half imagined in a veil of haze. Even the buildings, the scattered piles of material, the gaunt skeleton of the derrick—their stark blackness of outline and clear-cut shadow were gone; the whole land was drenched in the mystery and magic of a desert moon.

RAWSON and the man beside him were silent. Even a mind perplexed by unanswerable problems must pause before the witchery of nature's softer moods.

"If Riley were here," said Smithy softly at last, "he wouldn't be seeing any devils. Fairies, pixies, the 'little people'—he'd be seeing them dancing."

Rawson shot his companion a sidelong, appraising glance. He had never penetrated before to this substratum of Smithy's nature. He had never, in fact, felt that he knew much about Smithy, whose past was still the one topic that was never mentioned. He saw his thick mop of black hair and the profile of his face as Smithy stared hazily down toward the sleeping camp. It was a matter of a minute or so before he knew that the head was outlined against an aura of red light.

Smithy was seated at his right. Off beyond him the three extinct craters made a dark background where the moonlight had not yet reached to their inner slopes. Smithy's head was directly in line with the largest crater's irregularly broken top; and about it was the faintest tinge of red.

For a moment the light dazed close; it seemed to be hovering about the head of the silent, seated man. Then Rawson moved, looked past, and found a true perspective for the phenomenon. One rugged cleft in the rim of the crater's cup made a peephole for seeing within. It was plainly red—the light came from inside the age-old throat.

"IT'S alive!" Rawson whispered in quick consternation. Almost he expected to see billowing clouds of smoke, the fearful pyrotechnics of volcanic eruption.

He sensed more than saw that Smithy had not turned his head. "Look!" he was shouting by now. "Wake up, Smithy! Good Lord!"

He stopped, open-mouthed. The red glow had meant volcanic fires; to have it change abruptly to a green radiance was disconcerting.

Green—pale green. Only through the gap, like a space where a tooth was missing in the giant jaw, could Dean Rawson see the changed light. Only from this one point could the view be had—there would be nothing visible from the camp below. And as quickly as it had come all

thought of volcanic fires left him. he knew with quick certainty that this was something that concerned him, that threatened, and that was linked up with the other threatening, mysterious happenings of the recent nights and days.

Still Smithy had not turned. Rawson felt one quick flash of annoyance at his helper's dullness—or indifference; then he knew that Smithy's dark-haired head was reached forward, that he was bending at a precarious angle to stare below him into the valley. Then:

"They're there!" said Smithy in a hushed voice, as if someone or something on that desert floor far below might hear and take alarm. "Look, Dean. Where's your glass? What are they?"

HIS cautious whispering was unnecessary. Below them a thin line of light pierced the darkness; another; then three more in quick succession before the sharp crack of pistol fire came to the men a thousand feet above. Rawson had snatched up his binoculars.

"To the left," Smithy was directing. "Off there, by the big casting. Great Scott! what's that light?"

Rawson got it in the glass—a single flash of green that cut the blackness with an almost audible hiss. It was gone in an instant while a man's voice screamed once in fear and agony, one scream that broke like brittle steel in the same instant that it began.

Dean found the big casting in the circle of his glass. There were black figures moving near it; they were indistinct. He changed the focus—they were gone before he could get their images sharp.

But the casting! Plainly he saw its great bulk that many men had worked to ease down to the sand. It was outlined clearly now until its edge became a blur, until the sand rolled in upon it, and its black mass became a circle that shrank and shrank and vanished utterly at the last.

"It's gone!" Rawson shouted. "It sank into the sand! I saw it. . . ."

He was running for the car. A clamor of voices was coming from below; the sound died under the thunder of the car's exhaust as Rawson gave it the gun and sent the big machine leaping toward the waiting curves.

CHAPTER V

The Attack

EVERY light of the camp was on as Rawson and his assistant approached. A shallow depression in the sand marked the place where the big casting had been. Beyond it a hundred feet was a black swarm of men that parted as the car drew near. They had been gathered about a figure upon the sand.

Dean sensed something peculiar about that figure as the big car ploughed to a stop. He leaped out and ran forward.

He knew it was Riley there on the ground, knew it while still he was a score of feet away. Only when he was close, however, did he realize that the body ended in two stubs of legs; only when he leaned above him did he know that the Irish foreman's big frame had been cut in two as if by a knife.

The severed legs lay a short distance beyond the body; they had fallen side by side in horrible awkwardness, their stumps of flesh protruding from charred clothing—and suddenly, shockingly, Rawson knew that the flesh of body and legs had been seared. The knife had been hot—its blade had been forged of flame!

He heard Smithy cursing softly, unconsciously, at his side.

"The green light," Smithy was saying in horrified understanding.

"But who did it? How did they do it? Where did they go?"

"Quiet!" ordered Rawson sharply. He dropped to his knees beside the mutilated body. Riley's eyes had opened in a sudden moment of consciousness.

THE voice that came from his lips was a ghastly whisper at first, but in the stricken thing that had been the body of Riley, foreman of the night drilling crew, some reservoir of strength must still have remained untapped.

He drew upon it now. His voice roared again as it had done so many times before through the Tomah Basin camp. It reached to every listening ear where crowding men stood hushed and motionless; and the overtone of terror that altered its customary timber was apparent to all.

"Devils!" said Riley. "Devils, straight out o' hell! . . . I saw 'em—I saw 'em plain! . . . I shot—as if hot lead could harm the imps of Satan. . . .

"Oh, sir,"—his eyes had found those of Dean Rawson who was leaning above—"for the love of hivin, Mister Rawson, do ye be quittin' drillin'. The place is damned. L'ave it, sir; go away. . . ."

His eyes closed. But he started up once more; he raised his head from the sand with one final convulsive movement, and his voice was high and shrill.

"The fire! The fire of hell! He's turnin' it on me! God help. . . ."

But Riley, before his faltering mind could recall again that torturing jet of flame, must have slipped away into a darkness as softly enveloping as the velvet shadow world behind the low-hung stars. Rawson's hand that felt for a moment above the heart, confirmed the message of the closed eyes and the head that fell inertly back.

He came slowly to his feet.

"Keep the floods on!" he ordered. "Take command of the armed guard, Smithy; keep the whole camp patrolled."

Then to the men:

"Boys, Riley was wrong. He believed what he said, all right, but Smith and I know better. Don't worry about devils. These're just some dirty, skulking dogs who got away with murder this time but who won't do it again. We know where they're hiding. I'm checking up on them right now. After that you'll all get a chance to square accounts for poor old Riley!"

"BUT the casting!" Smithy protested when he and Rawson were alone. "You can't explain that disappearance so easy, Dean."

"No, I can't explain that." Rawson's words came slowly. "They've got something that we don't understand as yet—but I'm going to know the answer, and I'm going to find out to-night!"

He was seated behind the wheel of his old car.

"I'm as good a desert man as there is in this crowd," he told Smith. "And it's my fight, you know. I'm going alone. But there'll be no fighting this trip; I'll just be scouting around."

He leaned from the car to grip Smithy's shoulder with a hand firm and steady.

"You didn't see the crater when the show was on. You think that I'm crazy to believe it, but up in that crater is where I'll find the answer to a lot of questions. Lord knows what that answer will be. I've quit trying to guess. I'm just going up there and find out."

He was gone, the rear wheels of the car throwing a spray of sand as he started heedless of Smithy's protests against the plan. Rawson was in no mood to argue. He must climb the mountain while it was night; under the sun he would

never reach the top alive. He would go alone and unseen.

He swung wide of the deserted town at the mountain's base. The spectral walls of Little Rhyolite still showed their empty windows that stared like dead eyes, and the man guided his car without lights along a hidden stretch of hard, salt-crusted desert. He felt certain that other eyes were watching.

HE began his climb at a point five miles away. The slopes that seemed smooth and hard from a distance became, at closer range, a place of wind-heaped, sandy ash, carved and scoured into fantastic forms. But its very roughness offered protection, and Rawson fought the dragging sand, and the gray, choking ash that dried his throat and cut it like emery, without fear of being observed.

He fought against time, too. Above Little Rhyolite, whatever mysterious men were making the ascent would find the going easy. There were windswept areas, long fields of pumice; a man could make good time there. Rawson had none of these to aid him. He cast anxious glances toward the eastern sky as he struggled on, till he saw gray light change to rose and gold—but he stood in the titanic cleft in the crater's rim as the first straight rays of the sun struck across.

The volcano's top had been stripped clean by the winds of countless years. Rocks, black, brown, even blood-red, were naked to the pitiless glare of the sun. Their colors were mingled in a weird fantasy of twisted lines that told of the inferno of heat in which they had been formed.

They towered high above the head of Dean Rawson as he stood, panting and trembling with exhaustion. The cleft before him had become enormous; it was a canyon half filled with pumice and coarse ash.

RAWSON stood for long minutes in quiet listening. At the canyon's end would lie the crater, and in that crater he would find.... But there was no slightest picture in his mind of what he might see. He knew only that he himself must remain unseen. He went forward cautiously.

Rocky walls; a floor of sand where his feet left no mark. He was watching ahead and above him. His gun was ready in his hand; he did not propose to be ambushed. He moved with never a sound.

The silence persisted; no living thing other than himself lent any flicker of motion to the scene. Not even a lizard could hope for existence amid these dead and barren heights. He was alone—the certainty of it had driven deeply into his mind before the canyon end was reached. And, desert man though he was and accustomed to traveling the waste places of the earth, Rawson learned a new meaning and depth of solitude.

Here was no voiceless companionship of trees or brush or cactus; no little living things scuttled across the rocks—he was alone, the only speck of life in a place where life seemed forbidden.

So sure of this was he that he stepped boldly from the canyon's end. He knew before he looked that he would see only more of the same desolation. And his mind was filled equally with anger and disappointment.

SOMETHING was opposing him! Something had come into their camp—had killed old Riley. And he, Rawson, had been so sure he would find traces here that would allow him to give that opposing force a name....

He stared out from the rocky

cleft into a sun-blasted pit. Already the rising sun was pouring its energy over the jagged rim of bleak rocks and down into the vast throat choked and filled with ash.

It sieged gently from all sides, the gray-brown powder that had been coughed from within the earth. It made a floor where Rawson could have walked with safety. But he did not go on.

"Damn it!" he said with sudden savagery. "What a fool I was to think of finding anyone here. Who would ever pick out a spot like this for a base of operations?"

He stared angrily at the floor of ash, at the black, outcropping masses of tufa. He was angry with himself, angry and baffled and tired from his climb. Far down in the vast, shallow pit blazing sunlight glinted from massive blocks whose sides were mirror-smooth. A whirl of wind eddied there for a moment and lifted the dust into a vertical gray column—the only sign of motion in the whole desolate scene. Rawson turned and tramped back toward the long hot descent to the floor of the Basin.

HE tried to maintain an air of confidence before the men. He kept them busy placing and stacking materials; to all appearances the work would go on despite the mysterious happenings of the night.

Dean even prepared to resume drilling operations. He sent down another bailer on the end of the ten-mile cable, but he left it there; he did not care to raise it and risk more inexplicable results with the consequent destruction of the men's morale.

"Too late to do any more," he said to Smithy that afternoon. "We'll drop all work—let the men get a good night's sleep. I'll take guard duty to-night, and you can run the job to-morrow."

There were men of the drilling crew standing near, though Rawson was handing the hoisting drums himself. A ratchet release lever hooked its end under a ring on Rawson's hand and pinched the flesh. Dean made this an excuse for waiting a moment while the drillers walked away.

"Ought not to wear it, I suppose," he said, and dabbed at a spot of blood under the gold band. "But it's an old cameo—it belonged to my Dad."

He was showing the ring to Smithy as the men passed from hearing.

"Don't want to be seen talking," he explained tersely. "Mustn't let the men know we are on edge—they're about ready to bolt. But you be ready for a call. Have your men armed. I am looking for more trouble to-night."

The two were laughing loudly as they followed the men toward the building where the cook was banging on an iron tire that served as a bell.

SOME three hours later Rawson was not smiling as he climbed the steel ladder of the great derrick; he was grimly intent upon the job at hand.

All thought of his drilling operations had gone from him. He was not anxious about the project. This was merely an interruption; the work would go on later. But right now there was an enemy to be met and a mystery to be solved.

A rifle slung from his shoulder bumped against him satisfyingly as he climbed. A man was on duty at a master switch—he would flood the camp with light at the rifle's first crack.

Dean seated himself at the top of the derrick. The cylinder of a huge floodlight was beside him. Beyond was the massive sheave block; the cables ran dimly down to the con-

crete drilling floor so far below. And on every side the quiet camp spread out dark and silent in the night. Dean surveyed it all with satisfaction. Nothing would get by him now.

But his further reflections were not so satisfying.

"Who did it? How? Where did they go?" He was echoing Smithy's questions and finding no ready answers. And that flame-thrower that had cut down old Riley—how was that worked? Its one green flash had been almost instantaneous.

He was puzzling over such futile questioning when he saw the first sign of attack.

AT the foot of the derrick was the hoisting shed. Except for that, there was clear sand for a radius of fifty feet around the derrick's base. Dean was staring suspiciously at that open space almost directly underneath.

Moving sand! He hardly knew what he had seen at first. Then the sand at one point bulged upward unmistakably.

For one instant Dean's thoughts shot off at a tangent. It was like the work of a huge gopher—he had seen the little animals break through like that. Then the sand parted, and something, indistinct, blurred, dark against the yellow background, broke from cover.

Rawson swung the rifle's muzzle over and down. Below him the vague shadow had moved. Dean caught the blurred mass beyond his sights, then swung the weapon aside. Who was it? He would have a look first.

The thin crack of his rifle ripped the silence of the sleeping camp. Dean had aimed to one side and he regretted it in the instant of firing. For, in the same second, there had come from the moving shadow the gleam of starlight reflected upward from polished metal.

DEAN swung the rifle back. He fired quickly a second time. Beside him the big light hissed into action and the whole camp sprang to sudden, blazing light. And through the quick brilliance, more dazzling even than the white glare itself, was one blinding line of green flame.

Dean saw it as it began. It came from the dim shadow that had sprung suddenly into sharp outline as the big lights came on. He saw the figure. He sensed that it was a man, though he knew vaguely that the figure was grotesque and hideous in some manner he had no time to discern.

The thin line of green flame ripped straight out, swinging in a quick, sweeping trajectory, slashing through the steelwork of the great derrick itself!

Dean knew he was lost in the blinding instant while that fiery jet was sweeping in a fan-shaped sector of vivid green. A knife of flame! It had destroyed a man; it was now cutting down a framework of steel as well!

The derrick was falling as he fired again. There came a crushing jar downward as the metal melted and failed, and the wild outward swing in the beginning of the toppling fall. In the mind of Dean Rawson was but one thought—the sights—and a something blurred beyond—a trigger to be pressed.

He was still firing when the shriek of torn steel went to thundering silence, and even the lights of Torah Basin Camp were swallowed up in the whirling night. . . .

CHAPTER VI

Into the Crater

SMITHY'S agonized face was above him when he came back to life. "God!" Smithy was breathing. "I thought you were gone, Dean! I thought you were dead!"

As it had been with Riley, there was one thought uppermost in Rawson's bewildered mind: "The fire!" he choked. "He's swinging it. . . ."

Then, after a time: "The derrick—it's falling! I went down with it! . . I hit—"

"I'll say you did," said the relieved Smithy. "The derrick smashed across the bunkhouse, snapped you off, sent you sliding down the side of a sand dune. It darned near scoured the clothes off you at that."

Slowly Rawson began to feel the return flow of life through his body: the shock had jarred every nerve to insensibility. Slowly he remembered and comprehended what had happened.

He was in his little office; he recognized his surroundings now. The windows were open. Outside the sun was shining. He realized at last the utter silence of that outer world.

He tried to raise himself from the cot, but fell back as his surroundings began to spin. "The camp!" he gasped weakly. "The men—I don't hear them."

"Gone!" Smith told him, while his eyes narrowed at some recollection and his hand came up unconsciously to a bruise of his cheek. "They beat it—went last night after the derrick fell. I tried to stop them. The fools were crazy with fear—devils, hell, all that kind of stuff. It all wound up in a fight—I couldn't hold 'em.

"You've got to get better kind of fast," he told Rawson. "We've got to get out of here ourselves—that flame-throwing stuff is too strong for me to take."

Rawson suddenly remembered the vague figure that had directed that flame. "Did I get him?" he demanded eagerly.

"You got him, yes, but then a whole swarm of things boiled up out of nowhere and carried him off! We weren't any of us close enough to see. The men said they were devils; I'm not sure they were wrong, either. Dean, old man, we're up against something rotten. We've got to get fixed for a fight; we can't handle this by ourselves."

RAWSON was silent. He spoke slowly at last:

"You mean we've got to quit—quit without knowing what we're up against. Can you imagine what they'll say to me back in town? Scared out, licked by something I've never even seen!"

"Scared?" Smithy inquired. "You couldn't find a better word for it if you hunted through the whole dictionary. Scared? Why, say, I'm so damn scared I'm shaking yet, and the only thing that will cure me of it is to look at those devils along the top of a machine gun! We'll go catch us some equipment and a few service men—"

"You're a good guy, Smithy." Rawson reached out and gripped one brown hand. "And we'll do as you say: but first I've got to get a line on things. I'm becoming as irrational as the men. I'm imagining all sort of crazy things."

"You don't have to imagine them." Smithy's voice was strained; it showed the tension under which he was laboring. "Men or beasts—God knows what they are!—but when they come up from nowhere—"

"Out of the sand," Rawson explained.

Smithy stared at him. "Out of the sand," he repeated. "Then, when they cut a man in two, melt steel as if it were butter, pull a few tons of metal down out of sight as easy as we would sink it in the ocean, flash their lights over in the ghost town, up on top of a volcano—"

"Stop!" shouted Rawson unexpectedly. Some sudden gleam of

understanding had flashed through his mind. He dragged himself to his feet and staggered to the doorway where he clung until the nausea of a whirling world had passed. "The dust! The dust!" he gasped.

Smithy put a hand on his shoulder. Plainly he thought Rawson out of his mind. "Easy, old-timer," he cautioned. "We'll get out of here. I hate to make you walk in the shape you're in, but the dirty cowards ran off with the trucks. They even took your car; there isn't a thing here on wheels."

But Rawson did not hear. He was staring off across the sand and he was muttering bitter words.

"Fool! Oh, you utter fool!" he said. "The dust—the dust." Then he let the roughly tender hands of Smithy guide him back to the cot where he fell into a troubled sleep.

THE comparative coolness of dusk was tempering the feverish midday heat when Rawson awoke. And, strangely, his troubles and all his conflicting plans had been simplified by the magic of sleep. His course was entirely plain. He was going to the crater again.

"What's there?" Smithy demanded. "What do you think that you'll find?"

"I don't know," was the reply.

"Then why—what the devil's the idea?"

"It's my job. They put it up to me, Erickson and his crowd. I've got to go."

And nothing Smithy could say seemed able to reach Rawson and swerve him from his single idea.

"You'll be safe on the road," Rawson told him, while he filled a canteen with water in preparation for his own trip. "You can get to the highway by morning."

Smithy did not trouble to reply. Was Rawson out of his mind? He could not be sure. Certainly he had got an awful bump, but there were no bones broken. However, it might be that he was still dazed—a crack on the head might have done it.

But there was no use in further argument, he admitted to himself. Dean was going to the crater again—there was no stopping him—but he was not going alone; Smithy could see to that.

AGAIN Rawson took the more difficult ascent. They went first to the ghost town: the slope above Little Rhyolite would save weary miles. But, once there, they knew that the route was not a place where they would care to be in the night. The realization came when Smithy, walking where they had been the day before, passing the sand dune where the wind had been scouring, seized Rawson's arm.

"I thought so," he said softly. "I thought I saw something there the other day, but the sand fell in and hid it. I didn't know the old-timers went in for subways in Little Rhyolite."

And Rawson looked as did Smithy, in wondering amazement, at the roughly round opening in the sand, a tunnel mouth, driven through the shifting sands—a tunnel, if Rawson was any judge, lined with brown glistening glass.

Understanding came quickly.

"The jet of flame!" he exclaimed half under his breath. "They melted their way through; the sand turned to glass; they held it some way for an instant while it hardened."

He walked cautiously toward the dark entrance and peered inside.

Darkness but for the nearer glinting reflections from walls that had once been molten and dripping. The tunnel dipped down at a slight angle, then straightened off horizontally. Rawson could have stood upright in it with easily another two feet of headroom to spare.

"And that," said Smithy, "is how

the dirty rats got over to the camp. Like moles in their runway. No wonder they could pop up from nowhere. But, Dean, old man, I'm thinkin' we're up against something we haven't dared speak of to each other. Don't tell me that it's just men we've got to meet—"

"Wait," Rawson begged in a hushed whisper. "Wait till we know. That's why I didn't dare go out without something definite to report. We'll go up—but not here. We'll get a line on this up top."

HE led the way from the crumbling walls and skirted the mountain's base to the place where he had climbed before. And, with the help of a supporting arm at times, he found himself again in the great cleft in the rocks.

Darkness now made the passageway a place of somber shadows. The broad cupped crater lay beyond in silent waiting; the vast sand-filled pit seemed, under the starlight, to have been only that instant cooled. The twisted rocks that formed the rim had been caught in the very instant of their tortures and frozen to deep silence and eternal death; the black masses of tufa, protruding from the packed ashy sand might have been buried by the smothering mass but a moment before. It was a place of death, a place where nothing moved—until again the breeze that whirled gustily over the saw-tooth crags snatched at the sand in that lowest pit and drew it up in a spiral of dust.

The word was on Rawson's lips. "Dust—dust in the crater. Fool! I said I could read sign; I thought I was a desert man."

"Dust? And why shouldn't there be dust? How do you usually have your volcanoes arranged, old man?"

"Fine dust!" Rawson interrupted in the same whisper. He was glancing sharply about him as if in fear of being overheard. "See, the wind is blowing it. Course sand and pumice—that's to be expected: but light dust in a place that the winds have been sweeping for the last million years! I don't have them arranged that way, Smithy—not unless the sand has been recently disturbed!"

HE moved soundlessly across the sand. There was no chance for concealment; the surface was too smooth for that. Yet he wished, as he moved onward down the long, gentle slope, that he had been able to keep under cover. In all the wide bowl of the great crater top was nothing but dead ashes of fires gone long centuries before, coarse, igneous rock—nothing to set the little nerves of one's spine to tingling. Rawson tried to tell himself he was alone. Even the gun in his hand seemed an absurd precaution. Yet he knew, with a certainty that went beyond mere seeing, that invisible eyes were upon him.

The blocks were massive when he drew near to them. They were buried in the sand, their sides like mirrors, their edges true and straight. "Crystals," Rawson tried to tell himself, but he knew they were not.

Gun in hand, he moved among the great rocks. Open sand lay beyond, running off at a steeper pitch to make a throat—a smaller pit in the great pit of the crater itself. Rawson noted it, then forgot it as he stooped for something that lay half hidden, its protruding end shining under the light of the stars, as he had seen it gleam before at the derrick's base.

He snatched up the metal tube, noting the lava tip, and that it was like the one Smithy had found in the ghost town. The tube, clearly, was part of some other mechanism, and Rawson realised with startling

suddenness that he was holding in his hand the jet of a flame-thrower—the same one, perhaps, that had almost sent him to his death.

The thought, while he was still thinking it, was blotted from his mind. He was thrown suddenly to the sandy earth; the sand was slipping swiftly from beneath his feet; he was scrambling on all fours, clawing wildly for some anchorage that would keep him from being swept away.

HE touched a corner of shining stone, drew himself to it, reached its slanting side, then scrambled frenziedly to the top and threw himself about to face the place of slipping sands. But where the sand had been, his wildly glaring eyes found only a black hole—a vertical bore, like the ancient throat of the volcano; and this, like the tunnel in the sand, was lined with smooth and glistening glass.

It was black at first, a yawning, ominous maw, till the polished sides caught a reflection from below and blazed red with the glare of hidden fires.

No time was needed for Dean's quick searching eyes to grasp the meaning of the change. Whatever had menaced the camp had set this trap. He swung sharply to leap from the block, but stopped at sight of Smith's chunky figure coming slowly across the sand.

"Back!" he shouted. His voice was almost a scream, shrill and crackling with excitement. "Get back, Smithy! I'm coming!"

HE would have leaped. Below the block the sand bulged upward as a yellow animal-thing came clawing up into the night. Dimly he saw it—saw this one and the others that must have been hidden in the sand. They were between him and Smithy! A blaze of red came from behind him—there must be others there! He snatched his gun from its holster as he turned.

Flames were hissing into the darkness, five or six of them in lines of hot crimson fire. They changed to green as he watched, and the livid light spread out in ghastly illumination over the creatures that directed them.

He saw them now—saw them in one age-long instant while he stood in horror on the black shining rock. He saw their heads, red-skinned, pointed, their staring eyes as large as saucers—owl-eyes. They were naked, and their bodies, that would have been almost crimson in the light of day, were blotched and ghastly in the green light. And each one held in long clawlike hands a thing of shining metal—a lava tip like the one he had found projected and ended in the hissing line of green.

A flame slashed downward. For one sickening second he waited to feel the beat of it, though it was many feet away; in his mind he cringed involuntarily from the ripping knife-cut of the fiery blade that would blast the life from him; then he knew that the flame had passed—it was tearing at the rock beneath his feet. And the cold stone turned to liquid fire at that touch.

It leaped in a splashing fountain to the sand. The blaze turned the whole pit to flame. On even the farthest rugged crag of the crater's rim the red light glowed. Before Rawson could raise his own weapon the blast had torn the rock from beneath his feet. The great mass tipped, rolled. Rawson's arms were flung wide in an effort to save himself. Then below him was the black throat with its walls of glass; he was plunging headlong into it, turning as he fell—and somewhere, far down in that throat, was the red glow of waiting fires. He saw it again and again as he fell. . . .

(To be continued.)

He glimpsed eagerly, then vanished.

Hellhounds of the Cosmos

By Clifford D. Simak

THE paper had gone to press, graphically describing the latest of the many horrible events which had been enacted upon the Earth in the last six months. The headlines screamed that Six Corners, a little hamlet in Pennsylvania had been wiped out by the Horror. Another front-page story told of a Terror in the Amazon valley which had sent the natives down the river in babbling fear. Other stories told of deaths here and there, all attributable to the "Black Horror," as it was called.

Weird are the conditions of the latest emotional struggle faced by Dr. White's ninety-nine men

The telephone rang.

"Hello," said the editor.

"London calling," came the voice of the operator.

"All right," replied the editor.

He recognized the voice of Terry Masters, special correspondent. His voice came clearly over the transatlantic telephone.

"The Horror is attacking London in force," he said. "There are thousands of them and they have completely surrounded the city. All roads are blocked. The government declared the city under martial rule a quarter of an hour ago and efforts are being made to prepare for resistance against the enemy."

"Just a second," the editor shouted into the transmitter.

He touched a button on his desk and in a moment an answering buzz told him he was in communication with the press-room.

"Stop the presses!" he yelled into the speaking tube. "Get ready for a new front make-up!"

"O.K.," came faintly through the tube, and the editor turned back to the phone.

"Now let's have it," he said, and the voice at the London end of the wire droned on, telling the story that in another half hour was read by a world which shuddered in cold fear even as it scanned the glaring headlines.

"WOODS," said the editor of the *Press* to a reporter, "run over and talk to Dr. Silas White. He phoned me to send someone. Something about this Horror business."

Henry Woods rose from his chair without a word and walked from the office. As he passed the wire machine it was tapping out, with a maddeningly methodical slowness, the story of the fall of London. Only half an hour before it had rapped forth the flashes concerning the attack on Paris and Berlin.

He passed out of the building into a street that was swarming with terrified humanity. Six months of terror, of numerous mysterious deaths, of villages blotted out, had set the world on edge. Now with London in possession of the Horror and Paris and Berlin fighting hopelessly for their lives, the entire population of the world was half insane with fright.

Exhorters on street corners enlarged upon the end of the world, asking that the people prepare for eternity, attributing the Horror to the act of a Supreme Being enraged with the wickedness of the Earth.

Expecting every moment an attack by the Horror, people left their work and gathered in the streets. Traffic, in places, had been blocked for hours and law and order were practically paralyzed. Commerce and transportation were disrupted as fright-ridden people fled from the larger cities, seeking doubtful hiding places in rural districts from the death that stalked the land.

A loudspeaker in front of a music store blared forth the latest news flashes.

"It has been learned," came the measured tones of the announcer, "that all communication with Berlin ceased about ten minutes ago. At Paris all efforts to hold the Horror at bay have been futile. Explosives blow it apart, but have the same effect upon it as explosion has on gas. It flies apart and then reforms again, not always in the same shape as it was before. A new gas, one of the most deadly ever conceived by man, has failed to have any effect on the things. Electric guns and heat guns have absolutely no effect upon them.

"A newsflash which has just come in from Rome says that a large number of the Horrors has been sighted north of that city by

armen. It seems they are attacking the capitals of the world first. Word comes from Washington that every known form of defense is being amassed at that city. New York is also preparing. . . ."

Henry Woods fought his way through the crowd which milled in front of the loudspeaker. The hum of excitement was giving away to a silence, the silence of a stunned people, the fearful silence of a populace facing a presence it is unable to understand, an embattled world standing with useless weapons before an incomprehensible enemy.

In despair the reporter looked about for a taxi, but realized, with a groan of resignation, that no taxi could possibly operate in that crowded street. A street car, blocked by the stream of humanity which jostled and elbowed about it, stood still, a defeated thing.

Seemingly the only man with a definite purpose in that whirlpool of terror-stricken men and women, the newspaperman settled down to the serious business of battling his way through the swarming street.

"BEFORE I go to the crux of the matter," said Dr. Silas White, about half an hour later, "let us first review what we know of this so-called Horror. Suppose you tell me exactly what you know of it."

Henry Woods shifted uneasily in his chair. Why didn't the old fool get down to business? The chief would raise hell if this story didn't make the regular edition. He stole a glance at his wrist-watch. There was still almost an hour left. Maybe he could manage it. If the old chap would only snap into it!

"I know no more," he said, "than is common knowledge."

The gimlet eyes of the old white-haired scientist regarded the newspaperman sharply.

"And that is?" he questioned.

There was no way out of it, thought Henry. He'd have to humor the old fellow.

"The Horror," he replied, "appeared on earth, so far as the knowledge of man is concerned, about six months ago."

Dr. White nodded approvingly.

"You state the facts very aptly," he said.

"How so?"

"When you say 'so far as the knowledge of man is concerned.'"

"Why is that?"

"You will understand in due time. Please proceed."

Vaguely the newspaperman wondered whether he was interviewing the scientist or the scientist interviewing him.

"THEY were first reported," Woods said, "early this spring. At that time they wiped out a small village in the province of Quebec. All the inhabitants, except a few fugitives, were found dead, killed mysteriously and half eaten, as if by wild beasts. The fugitives were demented, babbling of black shapes that swept down out of the dark forest upon the little town in the small hours of the morning.

"The next that was heard of them was about a week later, when they struck in an isolated rural district in Poland, killing and feeding on the population of several farms. In the next week more villages were wiped out, in practically every country on the face of the earth. From the hinterlands came tales of murder done at midnight, of men and women horribly mangled, of livestock slaughtered, of buildings crushed as if by some titanic force.

"At first they worked only at night and then, seeming to become bolder and more numerous, attacked in broad daylight."

The newspaperman paused.

"Is that what you want?" he asked.

"That's part of it," replied Dr. White, "but that's not all. What do these Horrors look like?"

"That's more difficult," said Henry. "They have been reported as every conceivable sort of monstrosity. Some are large and others are small. Some take the form of animals, others of birds and reptiles, and some are cast in appalling shapes such as might be snatched out of the horrid imagery of a thing which resided in a world entirely alien to our own."

DR. WHITE rose from his chair and strode across the room to confront the other.

"Young man," he asked, "do you think it possible the Horror might have come out of a world entirely alien to our own?"

"I don't know," replied Henry. "I know that some of the scientists believe they came from some other planet, perhaps even from some other solar system. I know they are like nothing ever known before on Earth. They are always inky black, something like black tar, you know, sort of sticky-looking, a disgusting sight. The weapons of mankind can't affect them. Explosives are useless and so are projectiles. They wade through poison gas and fiery chemicals and seem to enjoy them. Elaborate electrical barriers have failed. Heat doesn't make them turn a hair."

"And you think they came from some other planet, perhaps some other solar system?"

"I don't know what to think," said Henry. "If they came out of space they must have come in some conveyance, and that would certainly have been sighted, picked up long before it arrived, by our astronomers. If they came in small conveyances, there must have been many of them. If they came in a single conveyance, it would be too large to escape detection. That is, unless—"

"Unless what?" snapped the scientist.

"Unless it traveled at the speed of light. Then it would have been invisible."

"Not only invisible," snorted the old man, "but non-existent."

A question was on the tip of the newspaperman's tongue, but before it could be asked the old man was speaking again, asking a question:

"Can you imagine a fourth dimension?"

"No, I can't," said Henry.

"Can you imagine a thing of only two dimensions?"

"Vaguely, yes."

The scientist wrote his palms together.

"Now we're coming to it!" he exclaimed.

Henry Woods regarded the other narrowly. The old man must be turned. What did fourth and second dimensions have to do with the Horror?

"Do you know anything about evolution?" questioned the old man.

"I have a slight understanding of it. It is the process of upward growth, the stairs by which simple organisms climb to become more complex organisms."

Dr. White grunted and asked still another question:

"Do you know anything about the theory of the exploding universe? Have you ever noted the tendency of the perfectly balanced to run amuck?"

The reporter rose slowly to his feet.

"Dr. White," he said, "you phoned my paper you had a story for us. I came here to get it, but all you have done is ask me questions. If you can't tell me what you want us to publish, I will say good-day."

The doctor put forth a hand that shook slightly.

"Sit down, young man," he said. "I don't blame you for being impatient, but I will now come to my point."

The newspaperman sat down again.

"I HAVE developed a hypothesis," said Dr. White, "and have conducted several experiments which seem to bear it out. I am staking my reputation upon the supposition that it is correct. Not only that, but I am also staking the lives of several brave men who believe implicitly in me and my theory. After all, I suppose it makes little difference, for if I fail the world is doomed, if I succeed it is saved from complete destruction.

"Have you ever thought that our evolutionists might be wrong, that evolution might be downward instead of upward? The theory of the exploding universe, the belief that all of creation is running down, being thrown off balance by the loss of energy, spurred onward by cosmic accidents which tend to disturb its equilibrium, to a time when it will run wild and space will be filled with swirling dust of disintegrated worlds, would bear out this contention.

"This does not apply to the human race. There is no question that our evolution is upward, that we have arisen from one-celled creatures wallowing in the slime of primal seas. Our case is probably paralleled by thousands of other intelligences on far-flung planets and island universes. These instances, however, running at cross purposes to the general evolutional trend of the entire cosmos, are mere flashes in the eventual course of cosmic evolution, comparing no more to eternity than a split second does to a million years.

"Taking these 'instances, then, as inconsequentials', let us say that the trend of cosmic evolution is downward rather than upward, from complex units to simpler units rather than from simple units to more complex ones.

"Let us say that life and intelligence have degenerated. How would you say such a degeneration would take place? In just what way would it be manifested? What sort of transition would life pass through in passing from one stage to a lower one? Just what would be the nature of these stages."

The scientist's eyes glowed brightly as he bent forward in his chair. The newspaperman said simply: "I have no idea."

"Man," cried the old man, "can't you see that it would be a matter of dimensions? From the fourth dimension to the third, from the third to the second, from the second to the first, from the first to a questionable existence or plane which is beyond our understanding or perhaps to oblivion and the end of life. Might not the fourth have evolved from a fifth, the fifth from a sixth, the sixth from a seventh, and so on to no one knows what multidimension?"

DR. WHITE paused to allow the other man to grasp the importance of his statements. Woods failed lamentably to do so.

"But what has this to do with the Horror?" he asked.

"Have you absolutely no imagination?" shouted the old man.

"Why, I suppose I have, but I seem to fail to understand."

"We are facing an invasion of fourth dimensional creatures," the old man whispered, almost as if fearful to speak the words aloud. "We are being attacked by life which is one dimension above us in evolution. We are fighting, I tell you, a tribe of hellhounds out of the cosmos. They are unthinkably above us in the matter of intelligence. There is a chasm of knowl-

edge between us so wide and so deep that it staggers the imagination. They regard us as mere animals, perhaps not even that. So far as they are concerned we are just fodder, something to be eaten as we eat vegetables and cereals or the flesh of domesticated animals. Perhaps they have watched us for years, watching life on the world increase, lapping their monstrous jowls over the fattening of the earth. They have awaited the proper setting of the banquet table and now they are dining.

"Their thoughts are not our thoughts, their ideals not our ideals. Perhaps they have nothing in common with us except the primal basis of all life, self-preservation, the necessity of feeding.

"Maybe they have come of their own will. I prefer to believe that they have. Perhaps they are merely following the natural course of events, obeying some immutable law legislated by some higher being who watches over the cosmos and dictates what shall be and what shall not be. If this is true it means that there has been a flaw in my reasoning, for I believed that the life of each plane degenerated in company with the degeneration of its plane of existence, which would obey the same evolutional laws which govern the life upon it. I am quite satisfied that this invasion is a well-planned campaign, that some fourth-dimensional race has found a means of breaking through the veil of force which separates its plane from ours."

"But," pointed out Henry Woods, "you say they are fourth-dimensional things. I can't see anything about them to suggest an additional dimension. They are plainly three-dimensional."

"Of course they are three-dimensional. They would have to be to live in this world of three dimensions. The only two-dimensional objects which we know of in this world are merely illusions, projections of the third dimension, like a shadow. It is impossible for more than one dimension to live on any single plane.

"To attack us they would have to lose one dimension. This they have evidently done. You can see how utterly ridiculous it would be for you to try to attack a two-dimensional thing. So far as you were concerned it would have no mass. The same is true of the other dimensions. Similarly a being of a lesser plane could not harm an inhabitant of a higher plane. It is apparent that while the Horror has lost one material dimension, it has retained certain fourth-dimensional properties which make it invulnerable to the forces at the command of our plane."

The newspaperman was now sitting on the edge of his chair.

"But," he asked breathlessly, "it all sounds so hopeless. What can be done about it?"

Dr. White hitched his chair closer and his fingers closed with a fierce grasp upon the other's knee. A militant boom came into his voice.

"My boy," he said, "we are to strike back. We are going to invade the fourth-dimensional plane of these hellhounds. We are going to make them feel our strength. We are going to strike back."

Henry Woods sprang to his feet.

"How?" he shouted. "Have you. . . ?"

Dr. White nodded.

"I have found a way to send the third-dimensional into the fourth. Come and I will show you."

THE machine was huge, but it had an appearance of simple construction. A large rectangular block of what appeared to be a strange black metal was set on end and flanked on each side by two

smaller ones. On the top of the large block was set a half-globe of a strange substance, somewhat, Henry thought, like frosted glass. On one side of the large cube was set a lever, a long glass panel, two vertical tubes and three clock-face indicators. The control board, it appeared, was relatively simple.

Beside the mass of the five rectangles, on the floor, was a large plate of transparent substance, ground to a concave surface, through which one could see an intricate tangle of wire mesh.

Hanging from the ceiling, directly above the one on the floor, was another concave disk, but this one had a far more pronounced curvature.

Wires connected the two disks and each in turn was connected to the rectangular machine.

"It is a matter of the proper utilization of two forces, electrical and gravitational," proudly explained Dr. White. "Those two forces, properly used, warp the third-dimensional into the fourth. A reverse process is used to return the object to the third. The principle of the machine is—"

The old man was about to launch into a lengthy discussion, but Henry interrupted him. A glance at his watch had shown him press time was drawing perilously close.

"Just a second," he said. "You propose to warp a third-dimensional being into a fourth dimension. How can a third-dimensional thing exist there? You said a short time ago that only a specified dimension could exist on one single plane."

"You have missed my point," snapped Dr. White. "I am not sending a third-dimensional thing to a fourth dimension. I am changing the third-dimensional being into a fourth-dimensional being. I add a dimension, and automatically the being exists on a different plane. I am reversing evolution. This third dimension we now exist on evolved, millions of eons ago, from a fourth dimension. I am sending a lesser entity back over those millions of eons to a plane similar to one upon which his ancestors lived inconceivably long ago."

"But man, how do you know you can do it?"

THE doctor's eyes gleamed and his fingers reached out to press a bell.

A servant appeared almost at once.

"Bring me a dog," snapped the old man. The servant disappeared.

"Young man," said Dr. White, "I am going to show you how I know I can do it. I have done it before, now I am going to do it for you. I have sent dogs and cats back to the fourth dimension and returned them safely to this room. I can do the same with men."

The servant reappeared, carrying in his arms a small dog. The doctor stepped to the control board of his strange machine.

"All right, George," he said.

The servant had evidently worked with the old man enough to know what was expected of him. He stepped close to the floor disk and waited. The dog whined softly, sensing that all was not exactly right.

The old scientist slowly shoved the lever toward the right, and as he did so a faint hum filled the room, rising to a stupendous roar as he advanced the lever. From both floor disk and upper disk leaped strange cones of blue light, which met midway to form an hour-glass shape of brilliance.

The light did not waver or sparkle. It did not flow. It seemed hard and brittle, like straight bars of force. The newspaperman, gazing with awe upon it, felt that terrific force was there. What had the old man said? Warp a third-dimen-

sional being into another dimension! That would take force!

As he watched, petrified by the spectacle, the servant stepped forward and, with a flip, tossed the little dog into the blue light. The animal could be discerned for a moment through the light and then it disappeared.

"Look in the globe!" shouted the old man; and Henry jerked his eyes from the column of light to the half-globe atop the machine.

He gasped. In the globe, deep within its milky center, glowed a picture that made his brain reel as he looked upon it. It was a scene such as no man could have imagined unaided. It was a horribly distorted projection of an eccentric landscape, a landscape hardly analogous to anything on Earth.

"THAT'S the fourth dimension, sir," said the servant.

"That's not the fourth dimension," the old man corrected him. "That's a third-dimensional impression of the fourth dimension. It is no more the fourth dimension than a shadow is three-dimensional. It, like a shadow, is merely a projection. It gives us a glimpse of what the fourth plane is like. It is a shadow of that plane."

Slowly a dark blotch began to grow in the landscape. Slowly it assumed definite form. It puzzled the reporter. It looked familiar. He could have sworn he had seen it somewhere before. It was alive, for it had moved.

"That, sir, is the dog," George volunteered.

"That was the dog," Dr. White again corrected him. "God knows what it is now."

He turned to the newspaperman.

"Have you seen enough?" he demanded.

Henry nodded.

The other slowly began to return the lever to its original position. The roaring subsided, the light faded, the projection in the half-globe grew fainter.

"How are you going to use it?" asked the newspaperman.

"I have ninety-eight men who have agreed to be projected into the fourth dimension to seek out the entities that are attacking us and attack them in turn. I shall send them out in an hour."

"Where is there a phone?" asked the newspaperman.

"In the next room," replied Dr. White.

As the reporter dashed out of the door, the light faded entirely from between the two disks and on the lower one a little dog crouched, quivering, softly whimpering.

THE old man stepped from the controls and approached the disk. He scooped the little animal from where it lay into his arms and patted the silky head.

"Good dog," he murmured; and the creature snuggled close to him, comforted, already forgetting that horrible place from which it had just returned.

"Is everything ready, George?" asked the old man.

"Yes, sir," replied the servant. "The men are all ready, even anxious to go. If you ask me, sir, they are a tough lot."

"They are as brave a group of men as ever graced the Earth," replied the scientist gently. "They are adventurers, every one of whom has faced danger and will not shrink from it. They are born fighters. My one regret is that I have not been able to secure more like them. A thousand men such as they should be able to conquer any opponent. It was impossible. The others were poor soft fools. They laughed in my face. They thought I was an old fool—I, the man who alone stands between them and utter destruction."

His voice had risen to almost a scream, but it again sank to a normal tone.

"I may be sending ninety-eight brave men to instant death. I hope not."

"You can always jerk them back, sir," suggested George.

"Maybe I can, maybe not," mured the old man.

Henry Woods appeared in the doorway.

"When do we start?" he asked.

"We?" exclaimed the scientist.

"Certainly, you don't believe you're going to leave me out of this. Why, man, it's the greatest story of all time. I'm going as special war correspondent."

"They believed it? They are going to publish it?" cried the old man, clutching at the newspaperman's sleeve.

"Well, the editor was skeptical at first, but after I swore on all sorts of oaths it was true, he ate it up. Maybe you think that story didn't stop the presses!"

"I didn't expect them to. I just took a chance. I thought they, too, would laugh at me."

"But when do we start?" persisted Henry.

"You are really in earnest? You really want to go?" asked the old man, unbelievingly.

"I am going. Try to stop me."

Dr. White glanced at his watch.

"We will start in exactly thirty-four minutes," he said.

"TEN seconds to go." George, standing with watch in hand, spoke in a precise manner, the very crispness of his words betraying the excitement under which he labored.

The blue light, hissing, drove from disk to disk; the room thundered with the roar of the machine, before which stood Dr. White, his hand on the lever, his eyes glued on the instruments before him.

In a line stood the men who were to fling themselves into the light to be warped into another dimension, there to seek out and fight an unknown enemy. The line was headed by a tall man with hands like hams, with a weather-beaten face and a wild mop of hair. Behind him stood a belligerent little cockney. Henry Woods stood fifth in line. They were a motley lot, adventurers every one of them, and some were obviously afraid as they stood before that column of light, with only a few seconds of the third dimension left to them. They had answered a weird advertisement, and had but a limited idea of what they were about to do. Grimly, though, they accepted it as a job, a bizarre job, but a job. They faced it as they had faced other equally dangerous, but less unusual, jobs.

"Five seconds," snapped George.

The lever was all the way over now. The half-globe showed, within its milky interior, a hideously distorted landscape. The light had taken on a hard, brittle appearance and its hiss had risen to a scream. The machine thundered steadily with a suggestion of horrible power.

"Time up!"

The tall man stepped forward. His foot reached the disk; another step and he was bathed in the light, a third and he glimmered momentarily, then vanished. Close on his heels followed the little cockney.

With his nerves at almost a snapping point, Henry moved on behind the fourth man. He was horribly afraid, he wanted to break from the line and run. It didn't matter where, any place to get away from that steady, steely light in front of him. He had seen three men step into it, glow for a second, and then disappear. A fourth man had placed his foot on the disk.

Cold sweat stood out on his brow. Like an automaton he placed one

foot on the disk. The fourth man had already disappeared.

"Snap into it, pal," growled the man behind.

Henry lifted the other foot, caught his toe on the edge of the disk and stumbled headlong into the column of light.

He was conscious of intense heat which was instantly followed by equally intense cold. For a moment his body seemed to be under enormous pressure, then it seemed to be expanding, flying apart, bursting, exploding. . . .

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HE felt solid ground under his feet, and his eyes, snapping open, saw an alien land. It was a land of somber color, with great gray moors, and beetling black cliffs. There was something queer about it, an intangible quality that baffled him.

He looked about him, expecting to see his companions. He saw no one. He was absolutely alone in that desolate brooding land. Something dreadful had happened! Was he the only one to be safely transported from the third dimension? Had some horrible accident occurred? Was he alone?

Sudden panic seized him. If something had happened, if the others were not here, might it not be possible that the machine would not be able to bring him back to his own dimension? Was he doomed to remain marooned forever in this terrible plane?

He looked down at his body and gasped in dismay. It was not his body!

It was a grotesque caricature of a body, a horrible profane mass of flesh, like a phantasmagoric beast snatched from the dreams of a lunatic.

It was real, however. He felt it with his hands, but they were not hands. They were something like hands; they served the same purpose that hands served in the third dimension. He was, he realized, a being of the fourth dimension, but in his fourth-dimensional brain still clung hard-fighting remnants of that faithful old third-dimensional brain. He could not, as yet, see with fourth-dimensional eyes, think purely fourth-dimensional thoughts. He had not oriented himself as yet to this new plane of existence. He was seeing the fourth dimension through the blurred lenses of millions of eons of third-dimensional existence. He was seeing it much more clearly than he had seen it in the half-globe atop the machine in Dr. White's laboratory, but he would not see it clearly until every vestige of the third dimension was wiped from him. That, he knew, would come in time.

He felt his weird body with those things that served as hands and he found, beneath his groping, unearthly fingers, great rolling muscles, powerful tendons, and hard, well-conditioned flesh. A sense of well-being surged through him and he growled like an animal, like an animal of that horrible fourth plane.

But the terrible sounds that came from between his slobbering lips were not those of his own voice, they were the voices of many men.

THEN he knew. He was not alone. Here, in this one body were the bodies, the brains, the power, the spirit, of those other ninety-eight men. In the fourth dimension, all the millions of third-dimensional things were one. Perhaps that particular portion of the third dimension called the Earth had sprung from, or degenerated from, one single unit of a dissolving worn-out fourth dimension. The third dimension, warped back to a higher plane, was automatically obeying the mystic laws of evolution by reforming in the shape of that old ancestor, unimaginably re-

moved in time from the race he had begot. He was no longer Henry Woods, newspaperman; he was an entity that had given birth, in the dim ages when the earth was born, to a third dimension. Nor was he alone. This body of his was composed of other sons of that ancient entity.

He felt himself grow, felt his body grow vaster, assume greater proportions, felt new vitality flow through him. It was the other men, the men who were flinging themselves into the column of light in the laboratory to be warped back to this plane, to be incorporated in his body.

It was not his body, however. His brain was not his alone. The pronoun, he realized, represented the sum total of those other men, his fellow adventurers.

Suddenly a new feeling came, a feeling of completeness, a feeling of supreme fitness. He knew that the last of the ninety-eight men had stepped across the disk, that all were here in this giant body.

Now he could see more clearly. Things in the landscape, which had escaped him before, became recognizable. Awful thoughts ran through his brain, heavy, ponderous, black thoughts. He began to recognize the landscape as something familiar, something he had seen before, a thing with which he was intimate. Phenomena, which his third-dimensional intelligence would have gasped at, became commonplace. He was finally seeing through fourth-dimensional eyes, thinking fourth-dimensional thoughts.

Memory seeped into his brain and he had fleeting visions, visions of dark caverns lit by hellish flames, of huge seas that battered remorselessly with mile-high waves against towering headlands that reared titanic toward a glowering sky. He remembered a red desert scattered with scarlet boulders, he remembered silver cliffs of gleaming metallic stone. Through all his thoughts ran something else, a scarlet thread of hate, an all-consuming passion, a fierce lust after the life of some other entity.

He was no longer a composite thing built of third-dimensional beings. He was a creature of another plane, a creature with a consuming hate, and suddenly he knew against whom this hate was directed and why. He knew also that this creature was near and his great fists closed and then spread wide as he knew it. How did he know it? Perhaps through some sense which he, as a being of another plane, held, but which was alien to the Earth. Later he asked himself this question. At the time, however, there was no questioning on his part. He only knew that somewhere near was a hated enemy and he did not question the source of his knowledge . . .

MUMBLING in an idiom incomprehensible to a third-dimensional being, filled with rage that wove redly through his brain, he lumbered down the hill onto the moor, his great strides eating up the distance, his footsteps shaking the ground.

At the foot of the hill he halted and from his throat issued a challenging roar that made the very crags surrounding the moor tremble. The rocks flung back the roar as if in mockery.

Again he shouted and in the shout he framed a lurid insult to the enemy that lurked there in the cliffs.

Again the crags flung back the insult, but this time the echoes, booming over the moor, were drowned by another voice, the voice of the enemy.

At the far end of the moor appeared a gigantic form, a form that shambled on grotesque, [illegible]

feet, growling angrily as he came.

He came rapidly despite his clumsy gait, and as he came he mouthed terrific threats.

Close to the other he halted and only then did recognition dawn in his eyes.

"*You, Mal Shaff?*" he growled in his guttural tongue, and surprise and consternation were written large upon his ugly face.

"Yes, it is I, Mal Shaff," boomed the other. "Remember, Ouglat, the day you destroyed me and my plane. I have returned to wreak my vengeance. I have solved a mystery you have never guessed and I have come back. You did not imagine you were attacking me again when you sent your minions to that other plane to feed upon the beings there. It was I you were attacking, fool, and I am here to kill you."

Ouglat leaped and the thing that had been Henry Woods, newspaperman, and ninety-eight other men, but was now Mal Shaff of the fourth dimension, leaped to meet him.

Mal Shaff felt the force of Ouglat, felt the sharp pain of a hammering fist, and lashed out with those horrible arms of his to smash at the leering face of his antagonist. He felt his fists strike solid flesh, felt the bones creak and tremble beneath his blow.

His nostrils were filled with the terrible stench of the other's foul breath and his filthy body. He teetered on his gnarled legs and side-stepped a vicious kick and then stepped in to gouge with straightened thumb at the other's eye. The thumb went true and Ouglat bowled in pain.

Mal Shaff leaped back as his opponent charged head down, and his knotted fist beat a thunderous tattoo as the misshapen beast closed in. He felt clawing fingers seeking his throat, felt ghastly nails ripping at his shoulders. In desperation he struck blindly, and Ouglat reeled away. With a quick stride he shortened the distance between them and struck Ouglat a hard blow squarely on his slavering mouth. Pressing hard upon the reeling figure, he swung his fists like sledge-hammers, and Ouglat stumbled, falling in a heap on the sand.

Mal Shaff leaped upon the fallen foe and kicked him with his taloned feet, ripping him wickedly. There was no thought of fair play, no faintest glimmer of mercy. This was a battle to the death: there could be no quarter.

THE fallen monster howled, but his voice cut short as his foul mouth, with its razor-edged fangs, closed on the other's body. His talons, seeking a hold, clawed deep.

Mal Shaff, his brain a screaming maelstrom of weird emotions, aimed pile-driver blows at the enemy, clawed and ripped. Together the two rolled, locked tight in titanic battle, on the sandy plain and a great cloud of heavy dust marked where they struggled.

In desperation Ouglat put every ounce of his strength into a heave that broke the other's grip and flung him away.

The two monstrosities surged to their feet, their eyes red with hate, glaring through the dust cloud at one another.

Slowly Ouglat's hand stole to a black, wicked cylinder that hung on a belt at his waist. His fingers closed upon it and he drew the weapon. As he leveled it at Mal Shaff, his lips curled back and his features distorted into something that was not pleasant to see.

Mal Shaff, with doubled fists, saw the great thumb of his enemy slowly depressing a button on the cylinder, and a great fear held him

rooted in his tracks. In the back of his brain something was vainly trying to explain to him the horror of this thing which the other held.

Then a multicolored spiral, like a corkscrew column of vapor, sprang from the cylinder and flashed toward him. It struck him full on the chest and even as it did so he caught the ugly fire of triumph in the red eyes of his enemy.

He felt a stinging sensation where the spiral struck, but that was all. He was astounded. He had feared this weapon, had been sure it portended some form of horrible death. But all it did was to produce a slight sting.

For a split second he stood stock-still, then he surged forward and advanced upon Ouglat, his hands outspread like claws. From his throat came those horrible sounds, the speech of the fourth dimension.

"Did I not tell you, foul son of Sargoathe, that I had solved a mystery you have never guessed at? Although you destroyed me long ago, I have returned. Throw away your puny weapon. I am of the lower dimension and am invulnerable to your engines of destruction. You bloated . . ." His words trailed off into a stream of vileness that could never have occurred to a third-dimensional mind.

Ouglat, with every line of his face distorted with fear, flung the weapon from him, and turning, fled clumsily down the moor, with Mal Shaff at his heels

STEADILY Mal Shaff gained and with only a few feet separating him from Ouglat, he dived with outspread arms at the other's legs.

The two came down together, but Mal Shaff's grip was broken by the fall and the two regained their feet at almost the same instant.

The wild moor resounded to their throaty roaring and the high cliffs flung back the echoes of the bellowing of the two gladiators below. It was sheer strength now and flesh and bone were bruised and broken under the life-shaking blows that they dealt. Great furrows were plowed in the sand by the sliding of heavy feet as the two fighters shifted to or away from attack. Blood, blood of fourth-dimensional creatures, covered the bodies of the two and stained the sand with its horrible hue. Perspiration streamed from them and their breath came in gulping gasps.

The lurid sun slid across the purple sky and still the two fought on, Ouglat, one of the ancients, and Mal Shaff, reincarnated. It was a battle of giants, a battle that must have beggared even the titanic tilting of forgotten gods and entities in the ages when the third-dimensional Earth was young.

Mal Shaff had no conception of time. He may have fought seconds or hours. It seemed an eternity. He had attempted to fight scientifically, but had failed to do so. While one part of him had cried out to elude his opponent, to wait for openings, to conserve his strength, another part had shouted at him to step in and smash, smash, smash at the hated monstrosity pitted against him.

It seemed Ouglat was growing in size, had become more agile, that his strength was greater. His punches hurt more; it was harder to hit him.

Still Mal Shaff drilled in determinedly, head down, fists working like pistons. As the other seemed to grow stronger and larger, he seemed to become smaller and weaker.

It was queer. Ouglat should be tired, too. His punches should be weaker. He should move more slowly, be heavier on his feet.

There was no doubt of it. Ouglat

was growing larger, was drawing on some mysterious reserve of strength. From somewhere, new force and life were flowing into his body. But from where was this strength coming?

A huge fist smashed against Mal Shaff's jaw. He felt himself lifted, and the next moment he skidded across the sand.

Lying there, gasping for breath, almost too fagged to rise, with the black-bulk of the enemy looming through the dust cloud before him, he suddenly realized the source of the other's renewed strength.

Ouglat was recalling his minions from the third dimension! They were incorporating in his body, returning to their parent body!

They were coming back from the third dimension to the fourth dimension to fight a third-dimensional thing reincarnated in the fourth-dimensional form it had lost millions of eons ago!

This was the end, thought Mal Shaff. But he staggered to his feet to meet the charge of the ancient enemy and a grim song, a death chant immeasurably old, suddenly and dimly remembered from out of the mists of countless millenniums, was on his lips as he swung a pile-driver blow into the suddenly astonished face of the rushing Ouglat. . . .

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THE milky globe atop the machine in Dr. White's laboratory glowed softly, and within that glow two figures seemed to struggle.

Before the machine, his hands still on the controls, stood Dr. Silas White. Behind him the room was crowded with newspapermen and photographers.

Hours had passed since the ninety-eight men—ninety-nine, counting Henry Woods—had stepped into the brittle column of light to be shunted back through unguessed time to a different plane of existence. The old scientist, during all those hours, had stood like a graven image before his machine, eyes staring fixedly at the globe.

Through the open windows he had heard the cry of the newsboy as the *Press* put the greatest scoop of all time on the street. The phone had rung like mad and George answered it. The doorbell buzzed repeatedly and George ushered in newspapermen who had asked innumerable questions, to which he had replied briefly, almost mechanically. The reporters had fought for the use of the one phone in the house and had finally drawn lots for it. A few had raced out to use other phones.

Photographers came and flashes popped and cameras clicked. The room was in an uproar. On the rare occasions when the reporters were not using the phone the instrument buzzed shrilly. Authoritative voices demanded Dr. Silas White. George, his eyes on the old man, stated that Dr. Silas White could not be disturbed, that he was busy.

From the street below came the heavy-throated hum of thousands of voices. The street was packed with a jostling crowd of awed humanity, every eye fastened on the house of Dr. Silas White. Lines of police held them back.

"What makes them move so slowly?" asked a reporter, staring at the globe. "They hardly seem to be moving. It looks like a slow motion picture."

"They are not moving slowly," replied Dr. White. "There must be a difference in time in the fourth dimension. Maybe what is hours to us is only seconds to them. Time must flow more slowly there. Perhaps it is a bigger place than this third plane. That may account for it. They aren't moving slowly, they are fighting savagely. It's a fight to the death! Watch!"

THE grotesque arm of one of the figures in the milky globe was moving out slowly, losing along, aimed at the head of the other. Slowly the other twisted his body aside, but too slowly. The fist finally touched the head, still moving slowly forward, the body following as slowly. The head of the creature twisted, bent backward, and the body toppled back in a leisurely manner.

"What does White say? . . . Can't you get a statement of some sort from him? Won't he talk at all? A hell of a fine reporter you are—can't even get a man to open his mouth. Ask him about Henry Woods. Get a human-interest slant on Woods walking into the light. Ask him how long this is going to last. Damn it all, man, do something, and don't bother me again until you have a real story—yes, I said a real story—are you hard of hearing? For God's sake, do something!"

The editor slammed the receiver on the hook.

"Brooks," he snapped, "get the War Department at Washington. Ask them if they're going to back up White. Go on, go on. Get busy. . . . How will you get them? I don't know. Just get them, that's all. Get them!"

Typewriters gibbered like chuckling morons through the roaring tumult of the editorial rooms. Copy boys rushed about, white sheets clutched in their grimy hands. Telephones jangled and strident voices blared through the haze that arose from the pipes and cigarettes of perspiring writers who feverishly transferred to paper the startling events that were rocking the world.

The editor, his necktie off, his shirt open, his sleeves rolled to the elbow, drummed his fingers on the desk. It had been a hectic twenty-four hours and he had stayed at the desk every minute of the time. He was dead tired. When the moment of relaxation came, when the tension snapped, he knew he would fall into an exhausted stupor of sleep, but the excitement was keeping him on his feet. There was work to do. There was news such as the world had never known before. Each new story meant a new front make-up, another extra. Even now the presses were thundering, even now papers with the ink hardly dry upon them were being snatched by the avid public from the hands of screaming newsboys.

A MAN raced toward the city desk, waving a sheet of paper in his hand. Sensing something unusual the others in the room crowded about as he laid the sheet before the editor.

"Just came in," the man gasped.

The paper was a wire dispatch. It read:

"Rome—The Black Horror is in full retreat. Although still apparently immune to the weapons being used against it, it is lifting the siege of this city. The cause is unknown."

The editor ran his eye down the sheet. There was another dateline:

"Madrid—The Black Horror, which has enclosed this city in a ring of dark terror for the last two days, is fleeing, rapidly disappearing. . . ."

The editor pressed a button. There was an answering buzz.

"Composing room," he shouted, "get ready for a new front! Yes, another extra. This will knock their eyes out!"

A telephone jangled furiously. The editor seized it.

"Yes. What was that? . . . White says he must have help. I see.

Woods and the others are weakening. Being badly beaten, eh? . . . More men needed to go out to the other plane. Wants reinforcements. Yes, I see. Well, tell him that he'll have them. If he can wait half an hour we'll have them walking by thousands into that light. I'll be damned if we won't! Just tell White to hang on! We'll have the whole nation coming to the rescue!"

He jabbed up the receiver.

"Richards," he said, "write a streamer, 'Help Needed,' 'Reinforcements Called'—something of that sort, you know. Make it scream. Tell the foreman to dig out the biggest type he has. A foot high. If we ever needed big type, we need it now!"

He turned to the telephone.

"Operator," he said, "get me the Secretary of War at Washington. The secretary in person, you understand. No one else will do."

He turned again to the reporters who stood about the desk.

"In two hours," he explained, banging the desk top for emphasis, "we'll have the United States Army marching into that light. Woods walked into!"

THE bloody sun was touching the edge of the weird world, seeming to hesitate before taking the final plunge behind the towering black crags that hung above the ink-pot shadows at their base. The purple sky had darkened until it was almost the color of soft, black velvet. Great stars were blazing out.

Ouglat loomed large in the gathering twilight, a horrible misshapen ogre of an outer world. He had grown taller, broader, greater. Mal Shaff's head now was on a level with the other's chest; his huge arms seemed toylike in comparison with those of Ouglat, his legs mere pipestems.

Time and time again he had barely escaped as the clutching hands of Ouglat reached out to grasp him. Once within those hands he would be torn apart.

The battle had become a game of hide and seek, a game of cat and mouse, with Mal Shaff the mouse.

Slowly the sun sank and the world became darker. His brain working feverishly, Mal Shaff waited for the darkness. Adroitly he worked the battle nearer and nearer to the Stygian darkness that lay at the foot of the mighty crags. In the darkness he might escape. He could no longer continue this unequal fight. Only escape was left.

The sun was gone now. Blackness was dropping swiftly over the land, like a great blanket, creating the illusion of the glowering sky descending to the ground. Only a few feet away lay the total blackness under the cliffs.

Like a flash Mal Shaff darted into the blackness, was completely swallowed in it. Roaring, Ouglat followed.

His shoulders almost touching the great rock wall that shot straight up hundreds of feet above him, Mal Shaff ran swiftly, fear lending speed to his shivering legs. Behind him he heard the bellowing of his enemy. Ouglat was searching for him, a hopeless search in that total darkness. He would never find him, Mal Shaff felt sure.

Fagged and out of breath, he dropped panting at the foot of the wall. Blood pounded through his head and his strength seemed to be gone. He lay still and stared out into the less dark moor that stretched before him.

For some time he lay there, resting. Aimlessly he looked out over the moor, and then he suddenly noted, some distance to his right, a hill rising from the moor. The hill was vaguely familiar. He remembered it dimly as being of great importance.

A sudden inexplicable restlessness filled him. Far behind him he heard the enraged bellowing of Ouglat, but that he scarcely noticed. So long as darkness lay upon the land he knew he was safe from his enemy.

The hill had made him restless. He must reach the top. He could think of no logical reason for doing so. Obviously he was safer here at the base of the cliff, but a voice seemed to be calling, a friendly voice from the hilltop.

HE rose on aching legs and forged ahead. Every fiber of his being cried out in protest, but resolutely he placed one foot ahead of the other, walking mechanically.

Opposite the hill he disregarded the strange call that pulsed down upon him long enough to rest his tortured body. He must build up his strength for the climb.

He realized that danger lay ahead. Once he quitted the blackness of the cliff's base, Ouglat, even in the darkness that lay over the land, might see him. That would be disastrous. Once over the top of the hill he would be safe.

Suddenly the landscape was bathed in light, a soft green radiance. One moment it had been pitch dark, the next it was light, as if a giant search-light had been snapped on.

In terror, Mal Shaff looked for the source of the light. Just above the horizon hung a great green orb, which moved up the ladder of the sky even as he watched.

A moon! A huge green satellite hurtling swiftly around this cursed world!

A great, overwhelming fear sat upon Mal Shaff and with a high, shrill scream of anger he raced forward, forgetful of aching body and outraged lungs.

His scream was answered from far off, and out of the shadows of the cliffs toward the far end of the moor a black figure hurled itself. Ouglat was on the trail!

Mal Shaff tore madly up the slope, topped the crest, and threw himself flat on the ground, almost exhausted.

A QUEER feeling stole over him, a queer feeling of well-being. New strength was flowing into him, the old thrill of battle was pounding through his blood once more.

Not only were queer things happening to his body, but also to his brain. The world about him looked queer, held a sort of an intangible mystery he could not understand. A half question formed in the back of his brain. Who and what was he? Queer thoughts to be thinking! He was Mal Shaff, but had he always been Mal Shaff?

He remembered a brittle column of light, creatures with bodies unlike his body, walking into it. He had been one of those creatures. There was something about dimensions, about different planes, a plan for one plane to attack another!

He scrambled to his bowed legs and beat his great chest with mighty, long-nailed hands. He flung back his head and from his throat broke a sound to curdle the blood of even the bravest.

On the moor below Ouglat heard the cry and answered it with one equally ferocious.

Mal Shaff took a step forward, then stopped stock-still. Through his brain went a sharp command to return to the spot where he had stood, to wait there until attacked. He stepped back, shifting his feet impatiently.

He was growing larger; every second fresh vitality was pouring into him. Before his eyes danced a red curtain of hate and his tongue roared forth a series of insulting

challenges to the figure that was even now approaching the foot of the hill.

As Ouglat climbed the hill, the night became an insane bedlam. The challenging roars beat like surf against the black cliffs.

Ouglat's lips were flecked with foam, his red eyes were mere slits, his mouth worked convulsively.

They were only a few feet apart when Ouglat charged.

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MAL SHAFF was ready for him. There was no longer any difference in their size and they met like the two forward walls of contending football teams.

Mal Shaff felt the soft throat of the other under his fingers and his grip tightened. Maddened, Ouglat shot terrific blow after terrific blow into Mal Shaff's body.

Try as he might, however, he could not shake the other's grip.

It was silent now. The night seemed brooding, watching the struggle on the hilltop.

Larger and larger grew Mal Shaff, until he overtopped Ouglat like a giant.

Then he loosened his grip and, as Ouglat tried to scuttle away, reached down to grasp him by the nape of his neck.

High above his head he lifted his enemy and dashed him to the ground. With a leap he was on the prostrate figure, trampling it apart, smashing it into the ground. With wild cries he stamped the earth, treading out the last of Ouglat, the Black Horror.

When no trace of the thing that had been Ouglat remained, he moved away and viewed the trampled ground.

Then, for the first time he noticed that the crest of the hill was crowded with other monstrous figures. He glared at them, half in surprise, half in anger. He had not noticed their silent approach.

"It is Mal Shaff!" cried one.

"Yes, I am Mal Shaff. What do you want?"

"But Mal Shaff, Ouglat destroyed you once long ago!"

"And I, just now," replied Mal Shaff, "have destroyed Ouglat."

The figures were silent, shifting uneasily. Then one stepped forward.

"Mal Shaff," it said, "we thought you were dead. Apparently it was not so. We welcome you to our land again. Ouglat, who once tried to kill you and apparently failed, you have killed, which is right and proper. Come and live with us again in peace. We welcome you."

Mal Shaff bowed.

Gone was all thought of the third dimension. Through Mal Shaff's mind raced strange, haunting memories of a red desert scattered with scarlet boulders, of silver cliffs of gleaming metallic stone, of huge seas battering against towering headlands. There were other things, too. Great palaces of shining jewels, and weird nights of inhuman joy where hellish flames lit deep, black caverns.

He bowed again.

"I thank you, Bathzar," he said.

Without a backward look he shambled down the hill with the others.

• • •

"YES?" said the editor. "What's that you say? Doctor White is dead! A suicide! Yeah, I understand. Worry, hey! Here, Roberts, take this story."

He handed over the phone.

"When you write it," he said, "play up the fact he was worried about not being able to bring the men back to the third dimension. Give him plenty of praise for ending the Black Horror. It's a big story."

"Sure," said Roberts, then spoke into the phone: "All right, Bill, shoot the works."

Dorcy bounded free and again used the length of his spear into the body.

The Raid on the Termites

A Complete Novelette

By Paul. Ernst

CHAPTER I

The Challenge of the Mound

IT was a curious, somehow weird-looking thing, that mound. About a yard in height and three and a half in diameter, it squatted in the grassy grove next the clump of trees like an enormous, inverted soup plate. Here and there tufts of grass waved on it, of a richer, deeper color, testifying to the unwholesome fertility of the crumbling outer stuff that had flaked from the solid mound walls.

Like an excrescence on the flank of Mother Earth herself, the mound loomed; like an unhealthy, cancerous growth. And inside the enigmatic thing was another world. A dark world, mysterious, horrible, peopled by blind and terrible demons—a world like a Dante's dream of a second Inferno.

Such, at least, were the thoughts of Dennis Braymer as he worked with delicate care at the task of sawing into the hard cement of a portion of the wall near the rounded top

His eyes, dark brown and rimmed with thick black lashes, flashed earnestly behind his glasses as they concentrated on his difficult job. His face, lean and tanned, was a mask of seriousness. To him, obviously, this was a task of vital importance; a task worthy of all a man's ability of brain and logic.

Obviously also, his companion thought of the work as just something with which to fill an idle afternoon. He puffed at a pipe, and regarded the entomologist with a smile.

Armed with splinters of steel, two ant-sized men dare the formidable mysteries of a termitary.

To Jim Holden, Denny was simply fussing fruitlessly and absurdly with an ordinary "ant-hill," as he persisted in miscalling a termitary. Playing with bugs, that was all. Wasting his time poking into the affairs of termites—and acting, by George, as though those affairs were of supreme significance!

He grinned, and tamped and relighted the tobacco in his pipe. He refrained from putting his thoughts into words, however. He knew, of old, that Denny was apt to explode if his beloved work were interrupted by a careless layman. Besides, Dennis had brought him here rather under protest, simply feeling that it was up to a host to do a little something or other by way of trying to amuse an old college mate who had come for a week's visit. Since he was there on sufferance, so to speak, it was up to him to keep still and not interrupt Denny's play.

The saw rasped softly another time or two, then moved, handled with surgeon's care, more gently—till at last a section about as big as the palm of a man's hand was loose on the mound-top.

Denny's eyes snapped. His whole wiry, tough body quivered. He visibly held his breath as he prepared to flip back that sawed section of curious, strong mound wall.

He snatched up his glass, overturned the section.

Jim drew near to watch, too, seized in spite of himself by some of the scientist's almost uncontrollable excitement.

Under the raised section turmoil reigned for a moment. Jim saw a horde of brownish-white insects, looking something like ants, dashing frenziedly this way and that as the unaccustomed light of sun and exposure of outer air impinged upon them. But the turmoil lasted only a little while.

Quickly, in perfect order, the termites retreated. The exposed honeycomb of cells and runways was deserted. A slight heaving of earth told how the insects were blocking off the entrances to the exposed floor, and making that floor their new roof to replace the roof this invading giant had stripped from over them.

In three minutes there wasn't a sign of life in the hole. The observation—if one could call so short a glimpse at so abnormally acting a colony an observation—was over.

DENNY rose to his feet, and dashed his glass to the ground. His face was twisted in lines of utter despair, and through his clenched teeth the breath whistled in uneven gasps.

"My God!" he groaned. "My God—if only I could see them! If only I could get in there, and watch them at their normal living. But it's always like this. The only glance we're permitted is at a stampede following the wrecking of a termitary. And that tells us no more about the real natures of the things than you could tell about the nature of normal men by watching their behavior after an earthquake!"

Jim Holden tapped out his pipe. On his face the impatiently humorous look gave place to a measure of sympathy. Good old Denny. How he took these trivial disappointments to heart. But, how odd that any man could get so worked up over such small affairs! These bugologists were queer people.

"Oh, well," he said, half really to soothe Denny, half deliberately to draw him out, "why get all boiled up about the contrariness of ordinary little bugs?"

Denny rose to the bait at once. "Ordinary little bugs? If you knew what you were talking about, you wouldn't dismiss the termite so casually! These 'ordinary little

bugs' are the most intelligent, the most significant and highly organized of all the insect world.

"Highly organized?" he repeated himself, his voice deepening. "They're like a race of inteliigent beings from another planet—superior even to Man, in some ways. They have a king and queen. They have 'soldiers,' developed from helpless, squashy things into nightmare creations with lobster-claw mandibles longer than the rest of their bodies put together. They have workers, who bore the tunnels and build the mounds. And they have winged ones from among which are picked new kings and queens to replace the original when they get old and useless. And all these varied forms, Jim, they hatch at will, through some marvelous power of selection, from the same, identical kind of eggs. Now, I ask you, could you take the unborn child and make it into a man with four arms or a woman with six legs and wings, at will, as these insects, in effect, do with theirs?"

"I never tried," said Jim.

"Just a soft, helpless, squashy little bug, to begin with." Denny went on, ignoring his friend's levity. "Able to live only in warm countries—yet dying when exposed directly to the sun. Requiring a very moist atmosphere, yet exiled to places where it doesn't rain for months at a time. And still, under circumstances harsher even than those Man has had to struggle against, they have survived and multiplied."

"Bah, bugs," murmured Jim maddeningly.

BUT again Denny ignored him, and went on with speculations concerning the subject that was his life passion. He was really thinking aloud, now; the irreverent Holden was for the moment non-existent.

"And the something, the unknown intelligence, that seems to rule each termitary! The something that seems able to combine oxygen from the air with hydrogen from the wood they eat and make necessary moisture; the something that directs all the blind subjects in their marvelous underground architecture; the something that, at will, hatches a dozen different kinds of beings from the common stock of eggs—what can it be? A sort of super-termite? A super-intellect set in the minute head of an insect, yet equal to the best brains of mankind? We'll probably never know, for, whatever the unknown intelligence is, it lurks in the foundations of the termitaries, yards beneath the surface, where we cannot penetrate without blowing up the whole mound—and at the same time destroying all the inhabitants."

Jim helped Denny gather up his scientific apparatus. They started across the fields toward Denny's roadster, several hundred yards away—Jim, blond and bulking, a hundred and ninety pounds of hardy muscle and bone; Denny wiry and slender, dark-eyed and dark-haired. The sledge-hammer and the rapier; the human bull, and the human panther; the one a student kept fit by outdoor studies, and the other a careless, rich young time-killer groomed to the pink by the big-game hunting and South Sea sailing and other adventurous ways of living he preferred.

"This stuff is all very interesting," he said perfunctorily, "but what has it to do with practical living? How will the study of bugs, no matter how remarkable the bug, be of benefit to the average man? What I mean is, your burning zeal—your really bitter disappointment a minute ago—seem a bit out of place. A bit—well, exaggerated, don't you know."

DENNY halted; and Jim, perforce, stopped, too. Denny's dark eyes burned into Jim's blue ones.

"How does it affect practical living? You, who have been in the tropics many times on your lion-spearing and snake-hunting jaunts, ask such a thing? Haven't you ever seen the damage these infernal things can do?"

Jim shook his head. "I've never happened to be in termite country, though I've heard tales about them."

"If you've heard stories, you have at least an idea of their deadliness when they're allowed to multiply. You must have heard how they literally eat up houses and the furnishings within, how they consume telegraph poles, railroad ties, anything wooden within reach. The termite is a ghastly menace. When they move in—men eventually move out! And their appearance here in California has got many a nationally famous man half crazy. That's what they mean to the average person!"

Jim scratched his head. "I didn't think of that angle of it," he admitted.

"Well, it's time you thought of something besides fantastic ways of risking your life. The termite has been kept in place, till now, by only two things: ants, which are its bitterest enemies, and constantly attack and hamper its development; and climatic conditions, which bar it from the temperate zones. Now I suppose, with all their intelligence and force of organization—not to mention that mysterious and terrible unknown intelligence that leads them—they find a way to whip the ants once for all, and to immunize themselves to climatic changes? Mankind will probably be doomed."

"Gosh," said Jim, with exaggerated terror.

"LAUGH if you want to," said Dennis, "but I tell you the termite is a very real menace. Even in its present stage of development. And the maddening thing is that we can't observe them and so discover how best to fight them.

"To get away from the light that is fatal to them, they build mounds like that behind us, of silicated, half-digested wood, which hardens into a sort of cement that will turn the cutting edge of steel. If you pry away some of the wall to spy on them, you get the fiasco I was just rewarded with. If you try to penetrate to the depths of the mystery, yards underground, by blowing up the termitary with gunpowder, the only way of getting to the heart of things—you destroy the termites. Strays are seldom seen; in order, again, to avoid light and air-exposure, they tunnel underground or build tubes above ground to every destination. Always they keep hidden and secret. Always they work from within, which is why walls and boards they have devoured look whole: the outer shell has been left untouched and all the core consumed."

"Can't you get at the beasts in the laboratory?" asked Jim.

"No. If you put them into glass boxes to watch them, they manage to corrode the glass so it ceases to be transparent. And they can bore their way out of any wood, or even metal, containers you try to keep them in. The termite seems destined to remain a gruesome, marvelous, possibly deadly mystery."

HE laughed abruptly, shrugged his shoulders, and started toward the car again.

"When I get off on my subject, there's no telling when I'll stop. But, Jim, I tell you, I'd give years of my life to be able to do what all entomologists are wild to do—study the depths of a termite mound.

God! What wouldn't I give for the privilege of shrinking to ant-size, and roaming loose in that secretive-looking mound behind us!"

He laughed again, and slapped Holden's bread back.

"*There* would be a thrill for you, you bored adventurer! There would be exploration work! A trip to Mars wouldn't be in it. The nightmare monsters you would see, the hideous creations, the cannibalism, the horrible but efficient slave system carried on by these blind, intelligent things in the dark depths of the subterranean cells! Lions? Suppose you were suddenly confronted by a thing as big as a horse, with fifteen-foot jaws of steely horn that could slice you in two and hardly know it! How would you like that?"

And now in the other man's eyes there was a glint, while his face expressed aroused interest.

Every man to his own game, thought Denny curiously, watching the transformation. He lived for scientific experiments and observations having to do with termites Holden existed, apparently, only for the thrill of pitting his brain and brawn against dangerous beasts, wild surroundings, or tempestuous elements. If only their two supreme interests in life could be combined . . .

"How would I like it?" said Jim. "Denny, old boy, when you can introduce me to an adventure like that. . . ." He waved his arm violently to complete the sentence. "What a book of travel it would make! The Raid on the Termites Exploring an Insect Hell. Death in an Ant-hill. . . ."

"Termitary! Termitary!" corrected Denny irritably.

"Whatever you want to call it." Jim conceded airily. He dumped the apparatus he was carrying into the rear compartment of the roadster. "But why speak of miracles? Even if we were sent to a modern hand laundry, we could hardly be shrunk to ant-size. Shall we ramble along home?"

CHAPTER II

The Pact

"WHAT are we going to do to-night?" asked Jim.

Dennis looked quizzically at his big friend Jim was pacing restlessly up and down the living room of the bachelor apartment, puffing jerkily at his eternal pipe. Dennis knew the symptoms. Though he hadn't seen Jim for over a year, he remembered his characteristics well enough.

Some men seem designed only for action. They are out of step with the modern era. They should have lived centuries ago when the world was more a place of physical, and less of purely mental, rivalry.

Jim was of this sort. Each time he returned from some trip—to Siberia, the Congo, the mountainous wilderness of the Caucasus—he was going to settle down and stop hopping about the globe from one little-known and dangerous spot to another. Each time, in a matter of weeks, he grew restless again, spoiling for action. Then came another impulsive journey.

He was spoiling for action now. He didn't really care what happened that evening, what was planned. His question was simply a bored protest at a too tame existence—a wistful hope that Denny might lighten his boredom, somehow.

"What are we going to do tonight?"

"Well," said Denny solemnly, "Mrs. Van Raggan is giving a reception this evening. We might go there and meet all the Best People. There is a lecture on the esthetics of modern art at Philamo Hall. Or we can see a talkie—"

"My Lord!" fumed Jim. Then: "Kidding aside, can't you dig up something interesting?"

"Kidding aside," said Dennis, in a different tone, "I have dug up something interesting. We're going to visit a friend of mine, Matthew Breen. A young man, still unknown, who, in my opinon, is one of our greatest physicists. Matt is a kind of savage, so he may take to you. If he does—and if he's feeling in a good humor—he may show you some laboratory stunts that will afford you plenty of distraction. Come along—you're wearing out my rugs with your infernal pacing up and down!"

MATT BREEN'S place was in a ratty part of the poorer outskirts of town; and his laboratory was housed by what had once been a barn. But place and surroundings were forgotten at sight of the owner's face.

Huge and gaunt, with unblinking, frosty gray eyes, looking more like an arctic explorer than a man of science, Matt towered over the average man and carelessly dominated any assembly by sheer force of mentality. He even towered a little over big Jim Holden now, as he absently shook hands with him.

"Come in, come in," he said, his voice vague. And to Denny: "I'm busy as the devil, but you can watch over my shoulder if you want to. Got something new on. Great thing—though I don't think it'll have any practical meaning."

The two padded after him along a dusty hallway, up a flight of stairs that was little more than a ladder, and into the cavernous loft of the old barn which had been transformed into a laboratory.

Jim drew Denny aside a pace or two. "He says he's got something new. Isn't he afraid to show it to a stranger like me?"

"Afraid? Why should he be?"

"Well, ideas do get stolen now and then, you know."

Denny smiled. "What Matt gets hold of something new, you can be sure the discovery isn't a new kind of can-opener or patent towel-rack that can be 'stolen.' His ideas are safe for the simple reason that there probably aren't more than four other scientists on earth capable of even dimly comprehending them. All you and I can do—whatever this may turn out to be—is to watch and marvel."

MATT, meanwhile, had lumbered with awkward grace to a great wooden pedestal. Cupping down over this was a glass bell, about eight feet high, suspended from the roof.

Around the base of the pedestal was a ring of big lamp-affairs, that looked like a bank of flood-lights. The only difference was that where flood-lights would have had regular glass lenses to transmit light beams, these had thin plates of lead across the openings. Thick copper conduits branched to each from a big dynamo.

Matt reached into a welter of odds and ends on a bench, and picked up a tube. Rather like an ordinary electric light bulb, it looked, save that there were no filaments in the thin glass shell. Where filaments should have been there was a thin cylinder of bluish gray metal.

"Element number eighty-five," said Matt in his deep, abstracted voice, pointing at the bluish cylinder. "Located it about a year ago. Last of the missing elements. Does strange tricks when subjected to heavy electric current. In each of those things that look like searchlights is one of these bulbs."

He laid down the extra tube, turned toward a door in the near wall, then turned back to his silent guests again. Apparently he felt

they were due a little more enlightenment.

"Eighty-five isn't nearly as radioactive as the elements akin to it," he said. Satisfied that he had now explained everything, he started again toward the door.

As he neared it, Dennis and Jim heard a throaty growling, and a vicious scratching on the wooden panels. And as Matt opened the door a big mongrel dog leaped savagely at him!

CALMLY, Matt caught the brute by the throat and held it away from him at arm's length, seeming hardly to be aware of its eighty-odd pounds of struggling weight. Into Jim's eyes crept a glint of admiration. It was a feat of strength as well as of animal management; and, himself proficient in both, Jim could accord tribute where it was due.

"You came just as I was about to try an experiment on the highest form of life I've yet exposed to my new rays," he said, striding easily toward the glass bell with the savage hound. "It's worked all right with frogs and snakes—but will it work with more complex creatures? Mammalian creatures? That's a question."

Denny forbore to ask him what It did, how It worked, what the devil It was, anyway. From his own experience he knew that the abstraction of an experimenter insulates him from every outside contact. Matt, he realized, was probably making a great effort to remain aware that they were there in the laboratory at all; probably thought he had explained in great detail his new device and its powers.

Vaguely wrapped in his fog of concentration, Matt thrust the snarling dog under the bell, which he lowered quickly till it rested on the pedestal-floor and ringed the dog with a wall of glass behind which it barked and growled soundlessly.

Completely preoccupied again, Matt went to a big switch and threw it. The dynamo hummed, raised its pitch to a high, almost intolerable keening note. The ring of pseudo-searchlights seemed in an ominous sort of way to spring into life. The impression must have been entirely imaginary; actually the projectors didn't move in the slightest, didn't even vibrate. Yet the conviction persisted in the minds of both Jim and Dennis that some black, invisible force was pouring down those conduits, to be sifted, diffused, and hurled through the lead lenses at the dog in the bell.

THRILLED to the core, not having the faintest idea what it was they were about to see, but convinced that it must surely be of stupendous import, the two stared unwinkingly at the furious hound. Matt was staring, too; but his glance was almost casual, and was concentrated more on the glass of the bell than on the experimental object.

The reason for the direction of his gaze almost immediately became apparent. And as the reason was disclosed, Dennis and Jim exclaimed aloud in disappointment—at the same time, so intense was their nameless suspense, not knowing they had opened their mouths. It appeared that for yet a little while they were to remain in ignorance of the precise meaning of the experiment.

The glass of the bell was clouding. A swirling, milky vapor, not unlike fog, was filling the bell from top to bottom.

The dog, rapidly being hidden from sight by the gathering mist, suddenly stopped its antics and stood still in the center of the bell as

though overcome by surprise and indecision. Motionless, staring vacantly, it stood there for an instant—then was concealed completely by the rolling vapor.

But just before it disappeared, Jim turned to Denny in astonishment, to see if Denny had observed what he had; namely, that the fog seemed not to be gathering from the air penned up in the bell, but in some strange and rather awful way to be exuding *from the body of the dog itself!*

THE two stared back at the bell again, neither one sure he had been right in his impression. But now the glass was entirely opaque. So thick was the vapor within that it seemed on the point of turning to a liquid. Inside, swathed in the secrecy of the fleecy folds of mist—what was happening to the dog? The two men could only guess.

Matt glanced up at an electric clock with an oversized second hand. His fingers moved nervously on the switch, then threw it to cut contact. The dynamo keened its dying note. A silence so tense that it hurt filled the great laboratory.

All eyes were glued on the bell. The thick vapor that had been swirling and crowding as if to force itself through the glass, grew less restive in motion. Then it began to rise, ever more slowly, toward the top.

More and more compactly it packed itself into the arched glass dome, the top layers finally resembling nothing so much as cloudy beef gelatin. And now these top layers were solidifying, clinging to the glass.

Meanwhile, the bottom line of the vapor was slowly rising, inch at a time, like a shimmering curtain being raised from a stage floor. At last ten inches showed between the pedestal and the swaying bottom of the almost liquid vapor. Jim and Denny stooped to peer under the blanket of cloud. The dog! In what way had it been affected?

Again they exclaimed aloud, involuntarily, unconsciously.

There was no dog to be seen.

WITH about fourteen clear inches now exposed, they looked a second time, more intently. But their first glance had been right. The dog was gone from the bell. Utterly and completely vanished! Or so, at least, they thought at the moment.

The rising and solidifying process of the vapor went on, while Dennis and Jim stood, almost incapable of movement, and watched to see what Green was going to do next.

His next move came in about four minutes, when the crowding vapor had at last completely come to rest at the top of the dome like a deposit of opaque jelly. He stepped to the windlass that raised the bell, and turned the handle.

Immediately the two watchers strode impulsively toward the exposed pedestal floor.

"Wait a minute," commanded the scientist, his eyes sparkling with almost ferocious intensity. The two stopped. "You might step on it," he added, amazingly.

He caught up a common glass water tumbler, and cautiously moved to the edge of the platform. "It may be dead, of course," he muttered. "But I might as well be prepared."

Wonderingly, Jim and Dennis saw that he was intently searching every square inch of the pedestal flooring. Then they saw him crawl, like a stalking cat, toward a portion near the center—saw him clap the tumbler, upside down, over some unseen thing. . . .

"Got him!" came Matt's deep, furry voice. "And he isn't dead,

either. Not by a long way! Now we'll get a magnifying glass and study him."

Feeling like figures in a dream, Jim and Dennis looked through the lens with their absorbed host.

CAPERING about under the inverted tumbler, like a four-legged bug—and not a very large bug, either—was an incredible thing. A thing with a soft, furry coat such as no true insect possesses. A thing with tiny, canine jaws, from which hung a panting speck of a tongue like no bug ever had.

"Yes," rumbled Matt, "the specimen is far indeed from being dead. I don't know how long it might exist in so microscopic a state, nor whether it has been seriously deranged, body or brain, by the diminishing process. But at least—it's alive."

"My God!" whispered Dennis. And, his first coherent sentence since the physicist had thrown the switch: "So this—*this*—is the overgrown brute you put under the bell a few minutes ago! This eighth-of-an-inch thing that is a miniature cartoon of a dog!"

Jim could merely stare from the tumbler and the marvel it walled in, to the man who had worked the miracle, and back to the tumbler again.

Denny sighed. "That thick, jelly-like substance in the top of the bell," he said, "what is it?"

"Oh, that." The miracle worker didn't lift his eyes from the tumbler and the very much alive and protesting bit of life it housed. "That's the dog. Rather, it's practically all of the dog save for this small residue of substance that clothes the vital life-spark."

JIM dabbed at his forehead and found it moist with sweat. "But how is it done?" he said shakily.

"With element eighty-five, as I told you," said Breen, most of whose attention was occupied by a new stunt he was trying: he had cut a microscopic sliver of meat off a gnawed bone, and was sliding it under the glass. Would the dog eat? Could it . . . ?

It could, and would! With a mighty bound, that covered all of a quarter of an inch, the tiny thing leaped on the meat and began to gnaw wolfishly at it. The effect was doubly shocking—to see this perfect little creature acting like any regular, full-sized dog, although as tiny as a woman's beauty spot!

"Marvelous stuff, eighty-five," Matt went on. "Any living thing, exposed to the lead-filtered emanations it gives off when disintegrated electrically to precisely the right degree, is reduced indefinitely in size. I could have made that dog as small as a microbe, even subvisible perhaps, if I chose. Curious. . . . Maybe the presence of eighty-five in minute quantities on earth is all that has kept every living thing from growing indefinitely, expanding gigantically right off the face of the globe. . . ."

BUT now Dennis was hardly listening to him. A notion so fantastic, so bizarre that he could not at once grasp it fully, had just struck him.

"Listen," he said at last, his voice so hoarse as to be almost unrecognizable, "listen—can you reverse that process?"

Matt nodded, and pointed to the viscous deposit in the dome of the bell. "The protoplasmic substance is still there. It can be rebuilt, remolded to its original form any time I put the dog back in the bell and let the particles of eighty-five, which are suspended in the vacuum tubes, settle back into their original, inert mass. You see, there is such a close affinity—"

Dennis cut him short almost rudely. It wasn't causes, marvelous though they might be, that he was interested in; it was results.

"Would you dare . . . that is . . . would you like to try that experiment on a human being?"

NOW for once the inventor's entire interest was seized by something outside his immediate work. He stared open-mouthed at Dennis.

"Would I?" he breathed. "Would I like. . . ." He grunted. "Such a question! No experiment is complete till man, the highest form of all life, has been subjected to it. I'd give anything for the chance!" He sighed explosively. "But of course that's impossible. I could never get anyone to be a subject. And I can't have it tried on myself because I'm the only one able to handle my apparatus in the event that anything goes wrong."

"But—would you try it on a human being if you had a chance?" persisted Denny.

"Hah!"

"And could you reduce a human being in stature as radically as you did the dog? For example, could you make a man . . . ant-size?"

Matt nodded vigorously, eyes fairly flaming. "I could make him even smaller."

Dennis stared at Jim. His face was transfigured. He shook with nervous eagerness. And Jim gazed back at Dennis as breathlessly and as tensely.

"Well?" said Dennis at last.

Jim nodded slowly.

"Yes," he said. "Of course."

And in those few words two men were committed to what was perhaps the strangest, most deadly, and surely the most unique, adventure the world has yet known. The improbable had happened. A man who lived but for dangers and extraordinary action, and a man who would have gambled his soul for the scientist's ecstasy of at last learning all about a hidden study—both had seen suddenly open up to them a broad avenue leading to the very pinnacle of their dreams.

CHAPTER III

Ant-Sized Men

NEXT morning, at scarcely more than daybreak, Jim and Denny stood, stripped and ready for the dread experiment, beside Matthew Breen's glass bell. The night, of course, had been sleepless. Sleep? How could slumber combat the fierce anticipations, the exotic imaginings, the clanging apprehensions of the two?

Most of the night had been spent by Denny in dutifully arguing with Jim about the advisability of his giving up the adventure, in soothing his conscience by presenting in all the angles he could think of the risks they would run.

"You'll be entering a different world, Jim," Denny had said. "An unimaginably different world. A terrible world, in which you'll be a naked, soft, defenseless thing. I'd hate to bet that we'd live even to reach the terratary. And once inside that—it's odds of seven to one that we'll never get out again."

"Stow it," Jim had urged, puffing at his pipe.

"I won't stow it. You may think you've run up against dangers before, but let me tell you that your most perilous jungle is safe as a church compared to the jungle an ordinary grass plot will present to us, if, as we plan, we get reduced to a quarter of an inch. I'm going in this with a mission. To me it's a heaven-sent opportunity—one I'm sure any entomologist would grab at. But you, frankly, are just a fool—"

"All right," Jim had cut in. "Let it go at that. I'm confirmed in my

folly. You can't argue me out of it, so don't try any more. Now, to be practical—have you thought of any way we could arm ourselves?"

"Arm ourselves?" repeated Dennis vaguely.

"Yes. It's a difficult problem. The finest watch-maker couldn't turn out a working model of a gun that could be handled by a man a quarter of an inch tall. At the same time I have no desire to go into this thing bare-handed. And I think I know something we can use."

"What?"

"Spears," said Jim with a grin. "Steel spears. They make steel wire, you know, down to two thousandths of an inch and finer. Probably our friend has some in his laboratory. Now, if we grind two pieces about a quarter of an inch long off such a wire, and sharpen the ends as well as we can, we'll have short spears we could swing very well.

"Then, there's the matter of clothes." He grinned again. "We'll want a breech clout, at least. I propose that we get the sheerest silk gauze we can find, and cut an eighth-inch square apiece to tie about our middles after the transformation."

HE slapped his fist into his palm. "By George! Such talk really begins to bring it home. Two men, clad in eighth-inch squares of silk gauze, using bits of almost invisibly fine steel wire as weapons, junketing forth into a world in which they'll be about the smallest and puniest things in sight! No more lords of creation, Denny. We'll have nothing but our wits to carry us through. But they, of course, will be supreme in the insect world as they are in the animal world."

"Will they be supreme?" Denny said softly. That unknown intelligence—that mystericus intellect (super-termite?) that seemed to rule each termite tribe, and which appeared to marvelously profound!

"I wonder. . . ."

Then he, in his turn, had descended to the practical.

"You've solved the problem of weapons and clothing, Jim," he said. "and now for my contribution." He left the room and came back in a few minutes with something in his hands. "Here are some shields for us."

"Oh, not pieces of steel armor. Shields in a figurative more than a literal sense."

He set down a small porcelain pot, and opened it. Within was a repulsive-looking, whitish-brown paste.

"Ground-up termites," he explained. "If we're to go wandering around in a termitary, we've got to persuade the inmates that we're friends, not foes. So we'll smear ourselves all over with this termite-paste before ever we enter the mound."

"Clever, these supposedly impractical scientists," murmured Jim, with a lightness that did not quite succeed in covering his real admiration of the shrewdness of the thought.

And now they stood in front of Breen's glass bell, with Breen beside them all eagerness to begin the experiment.

"What am I supposed to do after I've reduced you to the proper size?" he asked.

"Take us out to Morton's Grove, to the big termitary you'll find about a quarter of a mile off the road," said Denny. "Set us down near the opening to one of the larger termite tunnels. Then wait till we come out again. You may have to wait quite a while—but that isn't much to ask in return for our submission to your rays."

"I'll wait a week, if you wish. Le's see, what had I better carry you in?"

It was decided—with a lack of forethought later to be bitterly regretted—that an ordinary patty-dish of the kind in which restaurants serve butter, would make as good a conveyance as anything else.

MATT got the patty-dish and placed it on the pedestal floor, tipping it on edge so Jim and Denny would be able to climb into it unaided (he wouldn't dare attempt to lift bodies so small for fear of mortally injuring them between thumb and forefinger). Into the patty-dish, so they could be readily located, were placed the bits of wire, the tiny fragments of silk gauze to serve as breech clouts, and a generous dab of termite-paste; and the two men stepped inside the glass dome to share the fate that, the night before, had been the dog's.

The bell was lowered around them. They watched the inventor step to the switch and pull it down.

At first there was no sensation whatever. Almost with incredulity, they watched the glass walls cloud. realized that the fogging vapor was formed of exudations from their own substance. Then physical reaction set in.

The first symptom was paralysis. With the vapor wreathing their heads in dense clouds, they found themselves unable to move a muscle. The paralysis spread partially to the involuntary muscles. Heart action was retarded enormously; and they ceased almost entirely to breathe. In spite of the cessation of muscular functioning, however, they were still conscious in a vague way. Conscious enough, at all events, to go through a hell of agony when—second and last stage—every nerve in their bodies seemed of a sudden to be rasped with files, and every tiny particle of their flesh jerked and twitched as if to break loose from the ever-shrinking skin.

TIME, of course, was completely lost sight of. It might have been ten hours, or five minutes later when they realized they were still alive, still standing on their own feet, and now able to breathe and move. The spell of rigidity had been broken; nerves and muscles functioned smoothly and painlessly again. Also they were in clear air.

"I guess the experiment didn't work," Dennis began unsteadily. But then, as his eyes began to get accustomed to his fantastically new, though intrinsically unchanged surroundings, he cried aloud.

The experiment had worked. No doubt of that! And they were in a world where all the old familiar things were new and incredible marvels.

"What can be the nature of this stuff we're standing on?" wondered Jim, looking down.

Following his gaze, Denny too wondered for an instant, till realization came to him. "Why, it's ordinary wood! Just the wood of the pedestal platform!"

But it didn't seem like wood. The grain stood out in knee-high ridges in all directions to the limit of visibility. It was like a nightmare picture of a frozen bad-lands, split here and there by six feet broad, unfathomable chasms—which were the cracks in the flooring.

"Where's the patty-dish?" queried Jim.

Dennis gazed about. "We were standing right over it when the reducing process started. . . . Oh, there it is!"

FAR off to the right an enormous, shallowly hollowed plateau caught their eyes. They started toward it, hurdling the irregular ridges, leaping across the dizzy chasms.

The tiny dish had been tipped on edge—but when they reached it they found its thickness alone a daunting thing.

"It's a pity Matt didn't select a thinner kind of china," grumbled Dennis, gazing at the head-high wall that was the edge of the plate. "Here—I'll stand on your shoulders and then give you an arm up. Look out—it's slippery!"

It was. Their feet slid out from under them on the glazed surface repeatedly. It was with the utmost effort that they finally made their way to the center of the shallow plateau.

There, lying beside two heaps of coarse cloth and a mound of horrible-smelling stuff that he recognized as the dab of termite-paste, they saw two glistening steel bars. About five feet long, they seemed to be, and half an inch in diameter. The wire-ends which, a few moments ago, they had been forced to handle with tweezers for fear of losing!

Jim picked one up and drew it back for a pretended spear-thrust. He laughed, vibrantly, eagerly.

"I'm just beginning to realize it's really happened, and that the hunt has started. Bring on your bugs!"

Dennis stooped and picked up his spear. It was unwieldy, ponderous, the weight of that long, not-too-thin steel bar. Jim's great shoulders and heavy arms were suited well enough to such a weapon; but Dennis could have wished that his were some pounds lighter.

They turned their attention to the evil-smelling hill of termite-ointment. With many grimaces, they took turns in smearing each other from head to feet with the repulsive stuff. Then they knotted about them the yard-square pieces of fabric—once sheer silk gauze, now cloth as stiff and cumbersome as sail-cloth. They faced each other, ready for their trip.

The heavens above them, trailing up and up into mysterious darkness, suddenly became closer and sparkled with a diamond sheen. Stretching off and up out of sight was a mountainous column that might conceivably be a wrist.

"Matt's looking at us through a magnifying glass," concluded Denny.

ABRUPTLY the ridged badlands about them began to vibrate. Thunder crashed and roared around their ears.

"He's trying to say something to us," said Denny, when the awful din had ceased. "Oh, Matt—we're ready to go!"

Jim echoed his shout. Then Denny snorted. "Fools! Our voices are probably pitched way above the limit of audibility. He can't hear us any more than we can understand him!"

They gazed at each other. More than anything else that had happened, this showed them how entirely they were cut off from their old world. Truly, in discarding their normal size, they might as well have been marooned on another planet!

A tremendous, pinkish-gray wall lowered near them, split into segments, and surrounded their plateau. The plateau was lifted—with a dizzy swiftness that made their stomachs turn.

With sickening speed the plateau moved forward. The texture of the heavens above them changed. The sun—the one thing in their new universe that seemed unchanged in size and aspect—shone down on them. The plateau came jarringly to rest. Great cliffs of what seemed black basalt gleamed high over them.

Matt had carried them out of the building, and had set the patty-dish on the black leather seat of his automobile.

There was a distant thundering, as though all the worlds in the universe but Earth were being dashed to pieces. That was the motor starting. And then, as the car moved off, Jim and Dennis realised their mistake in choosing a patty-dish to ride in!

IN spite of the yielding leather cushion on which their dish was set, the two quarter-inch men were hurled this way and that, jounced horribly up and down, and slid headlong from one end of the plateau to the other as the automobile passed over the city streets. Impossible to stand. They could only crouch low on the hard glazed surface, and try to keep from breaking legs and arms in the worst earthquake it is possible to imagine. Anyone who has ever seen two bugs ill-advisedly try to walk across the vibrating hood of an automobile while the motor is running, will have some idea of the troubles that now beset Dennis and Jim.

"The ass!" groaned Jim, in a comparatively quiet spell. "Why doesn't he drive more carefully?"

"Probably," groaned Denny, "he's doing the best he can."

Probably! All that was left them was conjecture. They could only guess at what was happening in the world about them!

Matthew Breen's face and body were lost in sheer immensity above them. They knew they were riding in a car; but they couldn't see the car. All they could see was the black cliff that was the seat-cushion behind them. The world had disappeared—hidden in its bigness; the world, indeed, was just at present a patty-dish.

Somehow they endured the ride. Somehow they avoided broken bones, and were only shaken up and bruised when the distant roar of the motor ceased and the wind stopped howling about their ears.

"Well, we're here," said Dennis unsteadily. "Now for the real—"

His words were stopped by the sudden rising of the plateau. Again they felt the poignantly exaggerated, express-elevator feeling, till the plateau finally came to rest.

The crashing thunder of Matt's voice came to them, words utterly indistinguishable. The saucer was tipped sideways. . . .

Doubtless Matt thought he was acting with extreme gentleness; but in fact the dish was tilted so quickly and so without warning that Jim and Dennis slid from its center, head over heels, to fall over the edge and land with a bump on the ground. Their spears, sliding after, narrowly missed impaling them.

Once more came the distant crashing of Matt's voice. Then there was silence. Their gigantic protector, having dumped them unceremoniously into the grass of Morton's Grove, had ushered them squarely into the start of their insane adventure. From now on their fate belonged to them alone.

CHAPTER IV

The Raid

BEWILDEREDLY, they looked around them.

Ahead of them, barely to be seen for the trunks of giant trees intervening, was a smoothly-rounded mountain. Majestic and aloof it soared, dwarfing all near it—the termitary which, yesterday, had been but waist-high. There was their eventual goal; but meanwhile their immediate surroundings roused their greater interest—and all their alertness!

When Dennis had said they would find a common grass plot a wild and exotic jungle, he had spoken perhaps more truly than he knew. At any rate, the jungle they now found themselves in was some-

thing to exceed man's wildest dreams.

Far over their heads towered a wilderness of trees. But such trees! Without branches, shooting up and over in graceful, tangling curves, their trunks oddly flat and ribbon-like and yellow-green. It was impossible to look on them as grass stems.

Here and there the trees had fallen, presenting a tangled wilderness of leathery, five-foot-wide stripe. Webs of roots, tough and gnarled, whitish in color, curled in all directions to catch the feet and baffle the eye. It was an appalling underbrush. And it was an underbrush, moreover, in which there was plenty of wild life!

A hairy, pulpy thing, reddish in color, with gaury wings and a myriad flashing eyes scuttled close to them as though drawn by curiosity to inspect them. As big as an eagle it appeared to them; both grasped their spears; but soon, with a wild whistle of its wings, it rose up through the tangle of underbrush and hummed off. A fruit fly.

AND now a monstrous thing appeared far off, to stalk like a balloon on twenty-foot legs in their direction. With incredible quickness it loomed over them. Six feet through, its body was roughly spherical, and carried on those amazingly long, jointed legs. It stared at them with beady, cruel eyes, but finally teetered on its way again, leaving them untouched.

"I'll never again be able to see a daddy longlegs without shivering," said Jim. His voice was unconsciously sunk to little more than a whisper. This was a world of titanic dangers and fierce alarms. Instinct cautioned both of them to make no more noise than necessary. "We had better make for your termitary at once."

Dennis had been thinking that for some time. But he had been unable to locate a termite tunnel anywhere. Matt had been supposed to set them down near one. No doubt, to his own mind, he had placed them near one of the termite highways. But his ideas of distance were now so radically different from theirs that Dennis, at least, was unable to see a tunnel opening anywhere.

He spoke his thoughts to Jim. "There must be a tunnel opening somewhere very near us," he concluded. "But I—Good heavens!"

Both crouched in wary alarm, spears held for a thrust, if necessary, at the frightful thing approaching them from the near jungle.

Thirty feet long, it was, and six feet through, a blunt-ended, untapered serpent that glistened a moist crimson color in the rays of the sun. The trees quaked and rocked as it brushed against them in its deliberate advance. Dead leaves many feet across and too heavy for the combined efforts of both men to have budged, were pushed lightly this way and that as the monster moved. The very ground seemed to shake under its appalling weight.

"If *that* comes after us," breathed Jim, "we're through!"

But now Denny drew a long breath of relief.

"Be still," he said. "Make no sound, and no move, and it will probably pass us by. It's blind, and couldn't harm us in any way—unless it rolled on us."

The two stood motionless while the nightmare serpent crashed by. Then, with the earthworm fading into the distance, they resumed their hunt for the near tunnel entrance.

JIM, whose eyes were more accustomed to searching jungle depths, finally saw it—a black hole

.ending down into a small hill about two hundred yards ahead of them. He pointed.

"There we are. Come on."

Laboriously they set out toward it. Laboriously because at every step some almost insuperable hurdle barred their way. A fallen grass stalk was a problem; sometimes they had to curve back on their tracks for sixty or eighty feet in order to get around it. A dead leaf, drifted there from the trees near at hand, was almost a calamity, necessitating more circuitous maneuvering.

With every yard the realization of the stark peril that was now theirs increased.

A grasshopper, blundering to the ground within a rod of them, nearly crushed them with its several tons of weight. A bumblebee, as big as a flying elephant and twice as deadly, roared around them for several minutes as though debating whether or not to attack them, and finally roared off leaving them shaken and pale. But the most startling and narrow of their narrow escapes occurred an instant after that.

They had paused for an instant, alert but undecided, to stare at a coldly glaring spider that was barring their path. It was a small spider, barely more than waist-high. But something in its malevolent eyes made the two men hesitate about attacking it. At the same time it was squatting in the only clear path in sight, with tangles of stalks and leaves on either side. A journey around the ferocious brute might be a complicated, long-drawn-out affair.

Their problem was decided for them.

OVERHEAD, suddenly roared out a sound such as might have been made by a tri-motored flivver. There was a flash of yellow. The roar increased to an ear-shattering scream. Something swooped so breathlessly and at the same time so ponderously that the men were knocked flat by the hurricane of disturbed air.

A fleeting struggle ensued between some vast yellow body and the unfortunate spider. Then the spider, suddenly as immobile as a lump of stone, was drawn up into the heavens by the roaring yellow thing, and disappeared. A wasp had struck, and had obtained another meal.

"Thank God that thing had a one-track mind, and was concentrating on the spider," said Jim, with a rather humorless laugh.

Dennis was silent. He was beginning to realize that he knew too much about insects for his peace of mind. To Jim, insects had always heretofore been something to brush away or step on, as the circumstance might indicate. He had no idea, for example, of exactly what fate it was he had just missed. But Denny knew all about it.

He knew that if the wasp had chosen either of them, the chosen one would have felt a stabbing thing like a red-hot sword penetrate to his vitals. He knew that swift paralysis would have followed the thrust. He knew that then the victim would have been taken back, helpless and motionless as the spider was, to be laid side by side with other helpless but still conscious victims in the fetid depths of the wasp's nest. And he knew that finally an egg would have been laid on the victim's chest; an egg that would eventually hatch and deliver a bit of life that would calmly and leisurely devour the paralyzed food supply alive.

"Let's hurry," he suggested, glancing up to see if any more wasps were hovering about.

The lowering tunnel mouth was very near now. Barely twenty yards

away. What with the crowding monsters around them, the tunnel began to look like a haven. Almost at a run, they continued toward it.

THEN a commotion like that which might be made by a mighty army sounded in the underbrush behind them. Dennis looked back over his shoulder.

"Hurry!" he gasped, suddenly accelerating his pace into frank flight. "Ants. . . ."

Jim glanced back, too—and joined Denny in his flight. Pouring toward them at express train speed, flinging aside fallen stalks, climbing over obstructions as though no obstructions were there, was coming a grim and armored horde. Far in the lead, probably the one that had seen the men first and started the deadly chase, was a single ant.

The solitary leader was a monster of its kind. As tall as Jim, clashing in its horny armor, it rushed toward the fugitives.

"It's going to reach the tunnel before we do," Jim panted. "We've got to kill the thing—and do it before the rest get to us. . . ."

The monster was on them. Blindly, ferociously it hurled its bulk at the things that smelled like termites however little they resembled them. The termite-paste was, in this instance, the most deadly of challenges.

Jim stepped to the fore, with his spear point slanted to receive the onslaught, spear butt grounded at his feet.

Whether the six-legged horror would have had wit enough to comprehend the nature of the defense offered, and would have striven to circumvent it, had time been given it, is a question that will never be answered. For the thing wasn't given the time.

In mid-air it seemed to writhe and try to change the direction of its leap. But it was on the point and had transfixed itself before its intelligence, however keen, could have functioned.

The fight, though, was by no means over. With five feet of steel piercing it through, it whirled with hardly abated vitality toward Dennis. Its gargoyle head came close and closer.

DENNIS sprang sideways along its length, lifted the pointed bar he held, and dashed it down on what looked to him a vital spot—the unbelievably slender trunk that held its spatulate abdomen to its armored chest.

There was a crack as the bar smashed down on the weak point. The monster sank quivering to the ground. An instant later it was up, but now its movements were dazed and sluggish as it dragged its half-paralyzed abdomen after it, and fumbled and caught on the heavy bar that transfixed it.

Jim caught the bar and tugged it. "My spear!" he cried. "Denny—help!"

Together the two wrenched to jerk the spear loose from the horny armor of the dying ant. The rest of the pack were very near now.

"We'll have to let it go. . . ." panted Denny.

But at that instant their desperate efforts tore it loose from the convulsively jerking bulk. They darted into the tunnel mouth with the racing horde scarcely twenty yards behind them.

Without hesitation the ants poured in after them. Jim and Dennis leaped forward, in pitch darkness, now and then bumping heavily against a wall as the tunnel turned, but having at least no trouble with their footing: the floor was as smooth as though man-made.

Behind them they could hear the armored horde crashing along in the

blackness. The smashing noise of their progress was growing louder. The two had run perhaps fifty yards in the darkness. Another fifty, and they would be caught!

But now, just as their eyes—sharpened also by the danger they were in—began to grow accustomed to the gloom, they saw ahead of them a thing that might have stepped straight out of a horrible dream.

SIX feet of vulnerable, unarmored body, amply protected by horny head and shoulders and ten feet of awful, scissor-mandibles, faced them. The creature was doing a strange sort of war dance, swaying its terrible bulk back and forth rhythmically, while its feet remained immovable. An instant it did this, then it charged at the two men. Simultaneously the crashing of the fierce horde behind sounded with appalling nearness—the noise and odor of the ants preventing the huge termite guard in front of the men from recognizing and approving the smell of the termite-paste that covered their bodies.

"Follow me!" snapped Denny, remembering that the hideous attacking thing before them was blind, and gaining from that knowledge swift inspiration.

Jim gathered his muscles to follow at command. But he almost shouted aloud as he saw Denny leap—straight toward the enormous, snapping mandibles.

In an instant, however, Denny's idea was made clear. With a slide that would have done credit to any baseball player, the entomologist catapulted on his chest past the snapping peril. Jim followed, with not a foot to spare. They were not past the soft rear-parts of the thing, but they were at least past its horrible jaws. And before the monster could turn its unwieldy bulk in the tunnel, the ants were upon it.

For a few seconds, blinded to their own danger by the fascination of the struggle going on before them, the two men witnessed the grim watcher of the tunnel as it drove back wave after wave of attacking ants.

Two at a time, the invaders charged that wall of living horn. And two at a time they were swept against the walls, or slashed in two by the enormous mandibles. One against an army; but it was a full minute or so before the one began to weaken.

"Come," whispered Dennis, at last. "If what I think is going to happen occurs, this will be no place for us."

THEY went ahead, with the din of battle dying behind them, till they saw a small tunnel branching off beside the main stem. Into this they squeezed. But as Jim started to go farther down its constricted length, Dennis stopped him.

"We're fairly safe here, I think. We'll stay and watch . . ."

Silently, motionless, they lurked in the entrance of the side-avenue, and peered out at the main avenue they had just left. And now that avenue began to buzz with traffic.

First, more of the horrors with the enormous scissor-mandibles began to stream past them. In twos and threes, then in whole squads, they lumbered by, bound for the ant army that had invaded their sanctum.

Not quite too far ahead to be out of sight, the defenders halted. Several of their number went forward to help the dying Horatius. The rest lined up in a triple row across a wide patch in the tunnel, presenting a phalanx it would appear that nothing could beat.

"How do they know enough to gather here from distant parts of this hollow mountain?" whispered Jim to Denny. "How do they know

their city is besieged just at this spot, and that their help is needed!"

Dennis shrugged. His eyes were shining. This was the kind of thing he had come here for. This unhampered observation of a strange and terrible race at war and at work—it was well worth all the personal risks he might run.

"No man can answer your question, Jim. They're blind—they can't see their danger so as to know how to combat it. They couldn't hear, and be alarmed by, the vibrations of battle for a distance of more than a few yards. My only guess is that they are constantly and silently commanded by the unknown intelligence, the ruling brain, that hides deep in the earth beneath us and directs these 'soldier' termites in some marvelous way—though itself never seeing or hearing the actual dangers it guards against."

"The queen?" suggested Jim.

Again Denny shrugged. "Who knows? She might be the brains, as well as the egg layer, of the tribe. But don't talk too much. The vibration of our voices might lead them to us in spite of their blindness."

NOW the main avenue before them was humming with a new kind of traffic. From side to side it was being filled with a new sort of termite. These were smaller than the soldiers, and entirely unprotected by either horn armor plate or slashing mandibles.

Each of these carried an unwieldy block of gleaming substance. And each in turn dropped its block in a growing wall behind the savage defenders against the ants, and fastened it in place with a thick and viscous brown fluid that dried almost immediately into a kind of cement.

"The workers," whispered Dennis, enthralled. "The building blocks are half-digested wood. The cement is a sort of stuff that exudes from their own bodies. In ten minutes there will be a wall across the tunnel that no ants on earth could penetrate!"

"But the home guards, the brave lads and all that sort of thing, will be shut off on the outside of the wall with the enemy. And there are hundreds of the enemy," protested Jim.

"A necessary sacrifice," said Denny. "And so perfect is their organization that no one, including the soldiers to be sacrificed, ever makes any objection."

Jim shivered a little. "It's terrible, somehow. It's—it's inhuman!"

"Naturally. It's insectian, if there is such a word. And a wise man once predicted that the termite organization, being so much more perfect a one than man's, indicated the kind of society man would at some time build up for himself. In ten or twelve more centuries we, too, might go off in millions and deliberately starve to death because the ruling power decided there were too many people on earth. We, too, might devour our dead because it was essential not to let anything go to waste. We, too, might control our births so that we produced astronomers with telescopes in their heads instead of regular eyes, carpenters with hammer and saw instead of hands, soldiers with poison gas sacs in their chests so they could breathe death and destruction at will. It would be the perfect state of society."

"Maybe—but I'm glad I'll be dead before that times comes," said Jim with another shiver.

BY now the wall ahead of them was complete. On the other side of it the soldier termites stolidly fought on to their certain death. On the near side, the workers retreated to unknown depths in the great hollow mountain behind

them. The main avenue was once more clear, and, save for a few workers hastening on unknown errands, deserted.

"That's act's over," sighed Dennis. "But it may well be no more than a curtain raiser to the acts to come. Shall we be on our way? We're hardly on the fringe of the termitary yet—and I want to get at the heart of it, and into the depths far beneath it. Depths of hell, we'll probably find them, Jim. But a marvelous hell, and one no man has ever before seen."

They left their little haven and moved along the main tunnel toward the heart of the termitary, walking easily upright in this tunnel which was only one of many hundreds in the vast, hollowed mountain—which loomed into the outer sunshine to almost a height of a yard.

CHAPTER V

Trapped

ON along the tunnel they went. And as they progressed, Dennis got the answer to something that had troubled him a great deal before their entrance here—a problem which had been solved, rather amazingly, of itself.

Termitaries, as far as the entomologist knew, were pitch-black places which no ray of light ever entered. He had been afraid he would be forced to stumble blindly in unlit depths, able to see nothing at all, on a par with the blind creatures among whom he moved. Yet he and Jim could see in this subterranean labyrinth.

He observed now the reason for that. The walls on all sides, made of half-digested cellulose, had rotted just enough through long years to be faintly phosphorescent. And that simple natural fact was probably going to mean all the difference between life and death: it gave the two men at least the advantage of sight over the eyeless savage creatures among whom, helped by the termite-smell given by the paste, they hoped to glide unnoticed.

However, even the termite-paste, and the fact that the termitary citizens were blind, didn't seem enough to account for the immunity granted the two men as they began to come presently to more crowded passages and tunnels near the center of the mound.

On every side of them now, requiring the utmost in agility to keep from actually brushing against them, were hordes of the worker termites, and dozens of the frightful soldiers. Yet on the two men moved, ever more slowly, without one of the monsters attempting to touch them. It was odd—almost uncanny.

"Surely the noise of our walking, tiptoe as we may, must be heard by them—and noted as different from theirs," whispered Dennis. "Yet they pay no attention to us. If it is due to the paste, I must say it's wonderful stuff!"

Jim nodded in a puzzled way. "It's almost as if they wanted to make our inward path easy. I wonder—if it's going to be different when we try to get out again!"

Dennis was wondering that, too. It seemed absurd to suspect the things of being intelligent enough to lay traps. But it did look almost as though they were encouraging their two unheard-of visitors from another world to go on deeper and deeper into the heart of the eerie city (all the tunnels sloped down now), there perhaps to meet with some ghastly imprisonment.

He gave it up. Sufficient for the moment that they were unmolested, and that he had a chance at first hand to make observations more complete than the world of entomology had ever dreamed of.

THEY stumbled onto what seemed a death struggle between one of the giant soldiers and an inoffensive-looking worker. The drab, comparatively feeble body of the worker was wriggling right in the center of the great claws which, with a twitch, could have sliced it in two endwise. Yet the jaws did not twitch; and in a few moments the worker drew unconcernedly out and moved away.

"The soldier was getting his meal," whispered Denny, enthralled. "Their mandibles are enlarged so enormously that they can't feed themselves. The workers, who digest food for the whole tribe, feed them regularly. Then if a soldier gets in the least rebellious, he can simply be starved to death at any time."

"Ugh!" Jim whispered back. "Fancy being official stomach to three or four other people! More of your wonderful 'organization,' I suppose."

They went on, down and down, till Denny calculated they had at last reached nearly to the center of the vast city. And now they stumbled into something weird and wonderful indeed. Rather, they half fell into it, for it lay down a few feet and came as a complete surprise in the dimness; and not till they had recovered from their near fall and looked around for a few seconds did they realize where their last few steps—the last few steps of freedom they were to have in the grim underground kingdom—had taken them.

They were in a chamber so huge that it made the largest of man-made domes shrink to insignificance by comparison.

A HUNDRED yards or more in every direction, it extended. And far overhead, lost in distance, reared the arched roof. A twenty-story building could have been placed under that roof without trouble.

Lost in awe, Dennis gazed about him; and he saw on the floor, laid in orderly rows in countless thousands, that which gave further cause for wonderment: new-hatched larvae about the size of pumpkins but a sickly white in color—feeble, helpless blobs of life that one day would develop into soldiers and workers, winged rulers or police. The termite nursery.

"Whew!" gasped Jim, wiping his face. "From the heat in here you'd think we were getting close to the real, old-fashioned hell instead of an artificial, insect-made one. What are all these nauseating-looking blobs of lard lying about here, anyway?"

Denny told him. "Which is the reason for the heat," he concluded. "Jim, it's twenty degrees warmer in here than it is outdoors. How—how—can these insects regulate the temperature like that? The work of the ruling brain again? But where, and what, can that brain be?"

"Maybe we'll find out before we leave this place," said Jim, more prophetically than he knew. "Hello—we can't get out through the door we entered. We'll have to find another exit. Look."

Dennis looked. In the doorway they had just come through was a soldier—a giant even among giants. Its ten-foot jaws, like a questing, gigantic vise, were opening and closing regularly and rapidly across the opening of the portal. It made no attempt to enter the great nursery, just stood where it was and sliced the air rhythmically with its jaws.

"We haven't a chance of walking through *that* exit!" Dennis agreed. "Let's try the other side."

BUT before they could half cross the great room—walking between rows of life that weakly stirred like protoplasmic mud on

either side of them—a soldier appeared at that door, too. Like the first, it stationed itself there, and began the same regular, swift slicing movements of jaws that compassed the doorway from side to side and halfway from top to bottom.

"We might possibly be able to run through that giant's nut-cracker before it smashed shut on us," said Jim dubiously. "But I'd hate to try it. There's a door at the end, too."

They made for this, running now. But a third soldier appeared to block the way out with those deadly, clashing mandibles.

"You're *sure* they can't see?" demanded Jim, clutching his spear while he hesitated whether to try an attack on the fearful guard or to turn tail again. "Because they certainly act as if they did!"

"Direct commands from the ruling brain," Denny surmised soberly. "Somewhere, perhaps half a mile down in the earth, Something is able to see us through solid walls, read in our minds our intentions of what we're to do next, and send out wordless commands to these soldiers to execute countermoves."

"Rot!" said Jim testily. "These things are bugs, not supermen. And the fact that they're now bigger than we are, and much better armed, doesn't keep them from being just bugs. There's no real brain-power in evidence here."

But an instant later he changed his mind. They approached the fourth and last exit from the giant chamber. And here there was no guard. They were able to race out of it without interference. The oddity of that was glaring.

"Denny," gasped Jim, "we're being *herded!* Driven in a certain direction, and for a certain reason, by these damned things! Do you realize that?"

Dennis did realize it. And a moment later, when he glanced behind, he realized it more.

BEHIND them, marching in orderly twos that filled the tunnel from side to side, moved a body of the soldiers. As the men moved, they moved; never coming nearer and never dropping behind.

Experimentally, Dennis stopped. The grim soldiers stopped, too. Dennis walked back toward them a step or two, spear held ready.

The monsters did not try to attack. On the other hand they did not give ground, either; and as Denny got to within a few yards of them, one in the front line suddenly opened and shut his ponderous jaws.

They clashed together a matter of inches from Denny's torso—a clear warning to get on back in the direction he had come.

Jim came and stood beside him, heavy shoulder muscles bunched into knots, standing on the balls of his feet as a boxer stands before flashing in at an opponent.

"Shall we have it out with them here and now?" said Jim, his jaws set. "We wouldn't have a chance—but I'm beginning to get awfully doubtful about the fate these things have in store for us. I can't even guess at what it may be—but I've an idea it may be a lot worse than a quick, easy death!"

Denny shook his head. "Let's see it through," he muttered, looking at the nightmare jaws of their guard. Two sweeps of those jaws and he and Jim would lie in halves.

THEY started back down the corridor, the monstrous shepherds moving as they did. The way descended so steeply now that it was difficult for them to keep their footing. Then, yards below the level of the horrible nursery, the tunnel narrowed—and widened again into a chamber which had no other opening save the one they were being herded into. A blind end to the passageway.

"The bug Bastille," said Jim with a mirthless grin. "Here, I guess, we're going to wait for the powers-that-be to judge us and give us our sentence."

The giant soldiers halted. Two of them stood in the narrowed part of the tunnel, one behind the other, blocking it with a double, living barrier. Their jaws commenced moving regularly, savagely back and forth, open and closed. Blind these guards might be; but no living thing, even though it bristled with eyes, could creep out unscathed through the animated threshing machine those jaws made of that doorway. The two men were more securely held in their prison cell than they would have been by two-inch doors of nickel-steel. They could only wait there, helpless prisoners, to learn the intentions of the unknown Something that ruled the great city, and that held them so easily in its grasp.

CHAPTER VI

In the Food Room

RESTLESSLY, Jim paced back and forth in the narrow dank cell. At the doorway the two guards opened and closed their jaws, regularly, rhythmically, about sixty to the minute. Hours, the two men calculated, they had been there. And still the clashing of those jaws rang steadily, maddeningly in their ears.

Clash-clash-clash. The things seemed as tireless as machinery. Clash-clash-clash. And into that savage, tireless movement, Denny read a sort of longing refrain.

"Try—to—es—cape! Try—to—es—cape!"

He shivered. At any time, did he and Jim grow too fearful of the dark future or two nerve-wracked by the terrific suspense, they could step into those gigantic, steel-hard jaws. But to be sliced in two. . . .

Jim stopped his pacing, and stared speculatively at the wall of their cell. For the dozenth time he raised his ponderous spear and thrust the pointed end at the wall with all his strength. And for the dozenth time he was rewarded only by seeing a flake no larger than his clenched fist fall out.

"Might as well be cement!" he rasped. "God, we're caught like flies in a spiderweb!"

"Well, you wanted excitement," remarked Dennis, a bit acidly. The strain was telling on him more than on the less finely strung Holden; but he was struggling to keep himself in hand.

"So I did want excitement," said Jim. "But I want at least a sporting chance for my white-alley, too. But—"

He stopped; and both stared swiftly toward the door.

THE ponderous, gruesome clashing of jaws had stopped. The two nightmare guards stood motionless, as though at command. Then they moved into the cell, straight toward the two men.

"It's come!" said Jim through set teeth. He swung his spear up, ready to shoot it at the horny breastplate of the nearest monster with all his puny strength. "We're going to catch it now!"

But Dennis gazed more intently; and he saw that the blind but ferocious creatures showed no real signs of molesting them. Instead, they were edging to one side. In a moment, as the two men moved warily to keep their distance, they found suddenly that the soldiers were behind them, and that the doorway was free to them.

The glimpse of freedom, however, was not inspiring. The meaning of the move was too apparent: they were again being herded.

Whatever reigning power it was that had let them penetrate so

deeply into the trap, and then had surrounded and imprisoned them—was now going to honor them with an audience.

"His Majesty commands," commented Jim, reading the sinister gesture as clearly as Denny had. "I'll wager we're about to meet your 'unknown intelligence.' Denny. But be it 'super-termite' or be it Queen—whatever it may be—I want just one chance to use this spear of mine!"

Reluctantly he stepped forth before the fearful guard; reluctantly, but in full command of his nerves now that the wearing inactivity was ended and something definite was about to happen. Which proves but once again the wisdom of the gods in not allowing man to read the future. For could Jim Holden have foreseen the precise experience awaiting them, his nerve control—and Denny's, too—might not have been so firm.

AGAIN their way led sharply down, through tunnels loftier and broader and glowing more brilliantly with phosphorescence which was a testimonial to their greater age.

The efficiency of their herding was perfect. At each side entrance along the way stood one of the ghastly soldiers, jaws clashing with monotonous deadliness. Now and again several of the monsters appeared straight ahead, barring the avenue, and leaving no choice but to turn to right or left into cross-branching tunnels. Small chance here of missing the path! And always behind them marched their two particular guards, closing off their retreat.

"How do you suppose they sense our approach?" wondered Jim, who had noticed that the menacing jaw-clashing began while they were still fairly far from whatever side entrance was being barred to them. And again: "You're *sure* they can't see?"

"There isn't an eye in the lot of them," said Denny. "They must sense our coming by the vibration of our footsteps."

But when they tried tiptoeing, on noiseless bare feet, the result was the same. Surely the things could not hear them for more than a few feet; yet with no sound to guide them, the blind guards commenced automatically opening and closing those invulnerable jaws with the distant approach of the two men just the same. They could only ascribe it to the same force that seemed able to follow them, step by step and thought by thought, though it was far away and out of sight—the ruling brain of the termite tribe.

EVER hotter it grew as they descended, till at length a blast of heat like a draft from a furnace met them as they rounded a corner and stepped into a corridor that no longer led downward. They knew that they were very near the ruler's lair now, on the lowest level, deep in the foundations of the vast pile.

Dennis wiped perspiration, caused as much by emotion as by heat, from his face. He alone of all students on earth was going to penetrate the very heart of the termite mystery. He alone was going to have at least a glimpse of the baffling intelligence that science had guessed about for so many decades. He . . . alone. For it was hardly likely that he would ever get back up to the surface of earth to share his knowledge.

How different was this adventure from what he had hoped it might be! He had thought that the two of them might simply enter the termitary, mingle—perilously, but with at least a margin of safety—with the blind race it housed, and walk out again whenever they

pleased. But from the moment of entering they'd had no chance. They had been hopelessly in the clutch of the insects; played with, indulged, and finally tripped, to be led at last like dogs on a leash to the lair of the ruling power.

They rounded another corner and now, ahead of them, they saw what must be the end of this last and deepest of all the tunnels. This end showed as a glare of light. Real light, not the soft gleam of the rotting wood walls which was already paling feebly in comparison. The glare ahead of them, indeed, had something of the texture of electric light. Neither Jim nor Dennis could repress a sudden start; it was like coming abruptly onto a man-made fact, a bit of man-made world in the midst of this insect hell.

The damp heat was almost paralyzing now. Their limbs felt weak as they stumbled toward the light. But they were inexorably herded forward, and soon were at the threshold of the oddly illuminated chamber.

Now the two stopped for an instant and sniffed, as a peculiar odor came to their nostrils. It was a vague but fearsome odor, indescribable, making their skin crawl. A smell of decay—of death—and yet somehow of rank and fetid life. A combination of charnel-house and menagerie smell.

DENNY blanched as an inkling of what was before them came to his mind. He remembered the swooping wasp, that had so narrowly missed them at the start of their adventure. The wasp, he knew, was not the only insect that had certain dread ways of stocking its larder and keeping the contents of that larder fresh! The termites did not customarily follow these practises. Yet—yet the odor coming from the place before them certainly suggested. . . . But he tried to thrust such apprehensions from his thoughts.

They entered the chamber. The two gigantic soldiers stopped on the threshold behind them and took up their standard guard attitudes. The men stared about them. . . .

It was huge, this chamber, almost as huge as the nursery chamber they had blundered into. The source of the light was not apparent. It seemed to glow from walls and floor and ceiling, as though it were a box of glass with sunshine pouring in at all six sides.

And now horror began to mingle with awed interest, as they took in more comprehensively the sights in that place, and saw precisely what it contained.

Denny's apprehensions had been only too well founded. For larder, food storeroom, the chamber certainly was. But what a storeroom! And in what state the "food" that stocked it was!

ALL along the vast floor were laid rows of inert, fantastic bodies. Insects. The whole small-insect world seemed to be represented here. One or more of everything that crawled, flew, walked or bored, seemed gathered in this great room. Grubs, flies, worms, ants, things soft and slimy and things grim and armored, were piled side by side like cordwood.

These hulks, nearly all larger than the two quarter-inch men, lay stark and motionless where they had been dropped. From them came the odor that had stopped Jim and Denny on the threshold—the strange odor of blended life and death. And the reason for the queer odor became apparent as the two gazed more closely at the motionless hulks.

These things, like figures out of a delirium in their great size and

exaggerated frightfulness, were rigid as in death—but they were nevertheless not dead! Helpless as so many lumps of stone, they were still horribly, pitifully alive. Paralyzed, in some inscrutable termite fashion, probably fully conscious of their surroundings, they could only lie there and wait for their turn to come to be devoured by the ferocious creatures that had dragged them down to this, the bowels of the mound city.

Besides these things bound in the rigidity of death, there was more normal life. There were termites in that vast storeroom, too; but they were specialized creatures, such as termitary life abounds in, that were so distorted as to be hardly recognizable as termites.

Along one wall of the place, hanging head down and fastened there for life, was a row of worker termites whose function was obviously that of reservoirs: their abdomens, so enormously distended as to be nearly transparent, glistened in varying colors to indicate that they contained various liquids whose purpose could only be guessed at.

Living cisterns, never to move, never to know life even in the monotonous, joyless way of the normal worker, they hung there to be dipped into whenever the master that reigned over this inferno, or his immediate underlings, desired some of their contents!

IN addition, there were several each of two forms of termite soldier such as they had not seen before, standing rigidly at attention about the place.

At the door, of course, were the two creatures with the enormous mandibles that had escorted the pigmy men to the larder. But these others were as different as though they belonged to a different race.

Three had heads that were hideously bulbous in form, and which were flabby and elastic instead of armored with thick horn as were the heads of the usual soldiers. Like living syringes, these heads were; perambulating bulbs filled with some defensive or offensive liquid to be squirted out at the owner's will.

The third kind of soldier was represented in the spectacle of termites with heads that were huge and conical, resembling bungs, or the tapered cylindrical corks with which one plugs a bottle. These, Denny knew from his studies, had been evolved by termite biology for the purpose of temporarily stopping up any breach in termitary mound-wall or tunnel while the workers could assemble and repair the chink with more solid and permanent building material.

BUT how fantastically, gruesomely different these colossal figures looked, here in the deepest stronghold of termitedom, than as scurrying little insects viewed under an entomologist's glass! And how appallingly different was the viewpoint from which they were now being observed—here where the human observers were equal in size, and doomed at any moment perhaps to be paralyzed and piled with the helpless live things that made up the rest of the "larder"!

And the presiding genius of this mysterious, underground storeroom—where was it? Denny and Jim looked about over the rows of live food, and among the termite soldiers with their odd heads, in vain for a creature that might conceivably be the super-insect that so omnipotently ruled the mound.

Off in a corner they saw two more termites—standard worker types, standing motionless side by side, with a queer sort of mushroom growth linking them together—a large, gray-white ball borne

mutually on their backs. But that was all. The listing of those two workers concluded the roll-call of termites in the chamber as far as the two men could see. And the two were—just ordinary workers.

"I guess His Majesty is out," said Jim. But his voice, in spite of the attempted levity of the words, was low-pitched and somber. "Most impolite to keep us waiting—"

He stopped as Denny sharply threw up his hand. And he too gazed at the maneuver that had caught Denny's wary attention.

THIS was nothing save that the various soldiers in the chamber—seven of them, besides the two that never left their stations at the door—had moved. But they had moved in concert, almost as harmoniously in unison as if performing some sort of drill.

In a single line they filed across the rows of inert, palpitating, paralyzed bodies; and in a line they surrounded Jim and Denny in a hollow square about twenty feet across. There they took up their stations, the three soldiers with the syringe-heads, and the four with the unwieldy craniums that resembled bugs.

So perfectly had the move been executed, so perfectly and in unison had it been timed, that there could be little doubt it had resulted from a direct order. But where was the thing to give the command? Where was the head-general? In some far place, on his way to inspect the new and odd kind of prisoners, and giving orders to hold them yet more closely in anticipation of that inspection?

Jim turned to Denny and started to voice some of his thoughts. But the words were killed by the light that had appeared suddenly in Denny's eyes. In them had appeared a gleam of almost superstitious terror.

"Jim!" gasped Denny, raising his hand and pointing with trembling forefinger. "Jim—*look!*"

Jim turned to gaze, and his spear, clutched with almost convulsive desperation till this moment, sagged to the floor from his limp hands.

THE thing Denny had pointed at was the curious, large mushroom growth supported jointly on the backs of the two worker termites. It had been across the chamber from them when they first saw it. Now it was moving toward them, steadily, borne by the team of workers. And now, clearly, for the first time, they saw what it really was.

It was a head, that mushroom growth. Rather, the whitish-gray, soft-looking thing was a brain. For it had long ago burst free of the original insect skull casing in which it had been born. Evidence that it had once been a normal, termite head was given by the fact that here and there, on sides and top of the huge, spongy-looking mass, were brownish scales—fragments of the casing that had once contained its bulk.

Set low down under the sphere, with the whitish-gray mass beetling up over them like a curving cliff, were eyes; great, staring, dull things of the type termites have during the short-winged periods of their existences. Like huge round stones, those eyes regarded the two men as the team of termites marched closer.

Hanging down from the great mass was an abortive miniature of a body—soft, shriveled abdomen, almost nonexistent chest, and tiny, sticklike legs that trailed helplessly along the floor as the termites—in the manner of two men who support a helpless third man between them—bore it forward.

Here, then was the Intellect that ruled the tribe, the super-termite.

the master mind of the mound! This travesty of a termite! This thing with wasted limbs and torso, and with enormous, voracious brain that drained all sustenance constantly from the body! It was, in the insect world, a parallel to the dream that present-day Man sometimes has of Man a million years in the future: a thing all head and staring eyes, with a brain so enlarged that it must be artificially supported on its flabby torso.

"I guess His Majesty is out," Jim had said, with a shaky attempt at lightness.

But-he now realized his mistake. His Majesty hadn't been out. His Majesty had been with them all along—a four-foot, irregular sphere of grayish-white nerve matter and intricately wrinkled cortex dependent for movement on borrowed backs and legs—and was now peering at them out of the only pair of eyes in the termitary as though in doubt as to what to do first with his helpless-seeming captives.

CHAPTER VII

"Clinging Brown Stuff"

BEMUSED, appalled, the two gazed at this almost disembodied brain that held them captive. It continued to come steadily toward them, carried by its two faithful slaves; and the grotesque termite soldiers, that had closed about them in a hollow square, parted to let it through.

Such was the bewitchment of the two men as they stared at the monstrosity, that they did not hear the slight clashing of horn that accompanied a swift movement of one of the soldiers behind them.

The first thing they knew of such a movement was when they felt their arms pinioned to their sides with crushing force, and looked down to find a pair of hard, jointed forelegs coiled about their bodies. In answer to some voiceless command, one of the termites with the conical heads had approached behind them and wound a leg around each.

Sweat stood out on Denny's forehead at the repellent touch of that living bond. He turned and twisted wildly.

Jim was struggling madly in the grip of the other foreleg. Great shoulders bulging with the effort, muscles standing in knots on his heavy arms, he nearly succeeded in breaking free. Denny felt the tie that bound him relax ever so little as the monster centered its attention on the stronger man.

With a last effort, he tore his right arm free, and wriggled partly around in the thing's grip. He raised the spear and plunged it slantingly down into the hideous body.

This type of termite was armored more poorly than the others. Only its head was plated with horn; chest and abdomen were soft and vulnerable as those of any humble worker in the mound. The spear tore into it for two-thirds its length. There was a squeak—the first sound they had heard—from the wounded monster. The clutching forelegs tightened terribly, then began to loosen, quivering spasmodically as they slowly relinquished their grasp.

Denny bounded free and again sent the length of his spear into the loathsome body. Jim, meanwhile, had leaped toward his fallen spear. He stooped to pick it up—and was lost!

OBEYING another wordless order, one of the ghastly, syringe-headed monsters had stepped out of line with the start of the short struggle. This one bounded on Jim just as he leaned over for his weapon.

Denny shouted a warning, started

to run to his friend's aid. The dying termite, with a last burst of incredible vitality, caught his leg and held him.

In an instant it was done. The termite with the distorted-head had drenched Jim with a brown, thick liquid that covered him from shoulders to feet—and Jim was writhing helplessly on the floor.

Denny burst loose at last from the feebly clutching foreleg. He straightened, poised his spear, and with a strength born of near madness shot it at the syringe-headed thing's chest.

But this one was different, armored to the full save for its soft cranium. The steel bar glanced harmlessly from the heavy horn breastplate. In answer, the monster wheeled and drenched Dennis, too, with the loathsome liquid.

On the instant Dennis was helpless. As Jim had done, he sank to the floor, his body constricted in a sheath that tightened as it dried and which bound him as securely as any straitjacket might have done.

The two rolled on the floor, trying to shed the terrible coating of hardening fluid that contracted about them. But they were as impotent as two flies that had rolled in the sticky slime of some superflypaper. At last they gave it up.

Panting, helpless as mummies, they glared up at the stony eyes of the ruler-termite. The team of workers moved, bearing their burden of almost bodiless, mushroom brain like well-oiled machines.

Their forelegs went out. The two men were shoved along the floor ahead of the monarch—and were laid in one of the lines of paralyzed insects so patiently held as the ruler's private food supply!

THE great, stony eyes were next bent, as though in curiosity, on the spears that had done such damage to the termite with the conical head. In the true insect world there was no such phenomena as those glittering steel bars; and it appeared that the over-developed brain of the monarch held questions concerning their nature.

The team of termites wheeled, and walked over to the nearest spear, trailing the feeble, atrophied legs of their rider as they went. They squatted close to the floor, and the staring eyes examined the spears at close range. Then the owner of the eyes apparently sent out another command; for one of the guards at the door left its post and drew near, scissor-mandibles opened in obedience.

The hard mandibles clashed over one of the steel bars. The jaws crunched shut, with a nerve-rasping grind. They made, naturally, no impression on the bar. The guard retired to its post at the doorway.

The termite-ruler seemed to think this over, for a moment. Then at some telepathic order, its two bearers picked up the spear and carried it, and their physically helpless ruler, over to one of the living cisterns—one filled with a dark red liquid.

One of the beasts of burden reached up and thrust an end of the spear into the hugely distended abdomen filled with the unknown red liquid. The spear was withdrawn, with about a foot of its blunt end reddened by the fluid. The termite laid it down; the staring, dull eyes watched it. . . .

Slowly the end of the bar dulled with swift oxidation; slowly it turned brownish and flaked away, almost entirely consumed. The acid—if that was what the red stuff was—was awesomely powerful, at least with inorganic substances.

The termite team turned away from the bar, as if it were now a matter of indifference to the bloated brain borne on their backs. It approached the men again.

"I suppose," groaned Jim, "that our turn is next. The thing will probably have us dipped into the red stuff, to see if we're consumed, too."

BUT here His Majesty's curiosity was interrupted while he partook of nourishment.

The clashing jaws of the two termite soldiers at the door stopped for a moment. Jim and Dennis struggled to turn their heads—all of them they could move—to see what the cessation of jaw-clashing might mean.

Three worker termites squeezed past. They approached one of the line of paralyzed insect hulks, and sank their mandibles into a garden slug. They tugged at this until they had it under the live cistern of red liquid into which the spear had been thrust.

One of the three flicked drops of the reddish stuff onto the inert slug, till it was well sprinkled. Then they dragged the carcass back to the termite-ruler.

They got it there barely in time. In a matter of seconds after they had dropped it before the monarch, the slug had collapsed into a half-liquid puddle of decomposed protoplasm on the floor. One of the main functions—if not the main function—of the red acid, it seemed, was to act as a powerful digestive juice for His Majesty's food, predigesting it before it was taken into the feeble body for nourishment.

The termite team settled down over the semi-liquid mess that had been the slug, and tilted back. Now, under the huge globe of the brain, Jim and Denny saw exposed a small, soft mouth fringed by the tiny rudiments of atrophied mandibles. The repulsive little mouth touched the acid-softened mass. . .

The withered abdomen filled out. The whitish-gray lump of brain-matter grew slightly darker. It looked as though the mass of the dead slug were as large as the total bulk of the termite ruler; but not until the meal was nearly gone did the voracious feeding stop.

The three workers that had spread the banquet before their monarch, left the chamber. The guards resumed their interrupted jaw-clashing, which seemed senseless now: the captives, though not paralyzed as were the other captives there, were held so helpless by the dried and hardened fluid that escape was out of the question.

THE misshapen burden of the termite team seemed to relax a little, lethargically, as though so gorged with food as to render almost inactive the grotesquely exaggerated brain. The stony eyes became duller. Plainly the captives were to have a brief respite while the huge meal was assimilated.

"If I could get loose for just one minute," Jim took the opportunity to whisper to Denny, "and get at my spear—I think there would be one termite-ruler less in the world!"

Denny nodded. He had been thinking along the same lines as Jim: that bloated, swollen brain seemed a very vulnerable thing. Soft and boneless and formless, contained only by the dirty-white, membranous skin, it did appear a tempting target for a spear thrust. And now, sluggish with its meal, it seemed less alert and on guard.

Jim went on with his thought.

"I think you scientists are wrong about *all* the termites having intelligence," he whispered. "I believe that thing has the only reasoning mind in the mound. Look at those two guards at the door, for instance. There's no earthly need for them to keep guard as eternally as they do. We can't even move, let alone try to escape. They're utterly brainless, commanded to guard the

entrance with their mandibles, and continuing to guard it accordingly although the need for it is past."

Jim worked almost unthinkingly at his bonds. "If we could kill the wizened, little, big-headed thing, we might have a chance. There'd be nothing left to guide the tribe, no ruling power to direct them against us. We might even . . . escape!"

"Through the entire city—with untold thousands of these horrible things on our trail?" objected Denny gloomily.

"But if the untold thousands were dummies, used to being directed in every move by this master brain," urged Jim, "they might just blunder around while we slipped through the lines. . . ."

His words trailed into silence. Escape seemed so improbable as to be hardly worth talking about. Quiet reigned for a long time.

IT was broken finally by Dennis. "Jim," he breathed suddenly, "can you see my legs?"

With difficulty Jim turned his head. "Yes," he said. "Why?"

"It seems to me I can move my left knee—just a little!"

Jim looked more closely. "By heaven!" he exclaimed. "Denny, *I think the brown stuff is cracking!* Maybe it was never intended to be more than a temporary bond, to hold an enemy helpless just long enough for it to be killed! Maybe it hardens as it dries so that it loses all resiliency! Maybe—"

He stopped. A faint quivering of the ruler's withered little legs heralded its reawakening consciousness.

"Act helpless!" whispered Denny excitedly, as he too saw that faint stir of awakening. "Don't let the thing get an idea of what we're thinking. Because . . . we *might*, get our moment of freedom. . . ."

Both lay relaxed on the floor, eyes half closed. And in the hardening substance that covered them all over like a shell of cloudy brown bakelite, appeared more minute seams as it dried unevenly on the flexible human flesh beneath it. Whether Jim's guess that it was only a temporary bond was correct, or whether it had been developed to harden relentlessly only over unyielding surfaces of horn such as the termites' deadliest enemy, the ants, wear for armor, will never be known. But in a matter of moments it became apparent that it was going to prove too brittle to continue clamping flesh as elastic as that of the two humans!

BY now the termite-ruler seemed to have recovered fully from its gargantuan meal. And while, of course, there was no expression of any kind to be read in the stony, dull eyes, its actions seemed once more to indicate curiosity about these queer, two-legged bugs that wandered in here where they had no business to be.

The team of workers bore it close again, lowered the great head close to Denny. One of the team began chipping at the brown shell where it encased and held immovably to his body Denny's left hand.

A bit of the shell dropped away, exposing the fingers. Delicately, accurately, the worker's normal-sized but powerful mandibles edged the little finger away from the rest—and closed down over it. . . .

"Denny!" burst out Jim, who could just see, out of the corners of his eyes, what was being done. "My God . . . Denny. . . ."

Dennis himself said nothing. His face went white as chalk, and great drops of perspiration stood out on his forehead. But no sound came from his tortured lips.

The finger was lifted to the terrible little mouth under the gigantic head. The mouth received it;

the worker nuzzled with its mandibles for another finger. The monarch, having tried the taste of this latest addition to his larder, had found it good.

Jim writhed and twisted in his weakening bonds. There was a soft snapping as several now thoroughly dried sections of the brown substance cracked loose. The termite team whirled around; the ruler stared, as though in sudden realization of danger.

MORE furiously Jim fought his bonds. Dennis was still, recovering slowly from the nauseating weakness that had followed the pain of his mutilated hand. There was less blood flow than might have been expected, due, perhaps, to the fact that the nipping mandibles had pinched some of the encasing shell tight over the wound.

With a dull crack, a square foot of the brown stuff burst from Jim's straining chest. But now the monarch moved to correct the situation.

The two giant soldiers at the doorway started across the great room toward them. Simultaneously, a second of the syringe-headed termites moved to renew the bonds that were being broken.

But the move had come a shade too late. Jim kicked his legs free with a last wild jerk, and staggered to his feet. His arms were still held, in a measure, in spite of his utmost efforts to free them of the clinging brown stuff. But he could, and did, run away from the body of soldiers surrounding the monarch just before the deadly syringe of the first attacking termite could function against him.

The great, flabby head hurtled his way. But he knew what to expect, now. As the slimy brown stream directed by the agitated termite-ruler, squirted toward him, he leaped alertly aside—leaped again as the head swung around—and saw with savage hope that the monster had exhausted its discharge!

The two soldiers from the doorway closed in on him now. With their apparent command of the situation, the monstrosities with the bung- and syringe-heads closed in more tightly around their monarch. Theirs, evidently to protect that vulnerable big brain, and leave the attacking to others.

Jim fled down between the rows of paralyzed insects. The two great guards from the doorway, mandibles reaching fiercely toward the fugitive, followed. And there commenced, there in that deep-buried insect hell, a chase for life.

CHAPTER VIII

The Coming of the Soldiers

FOR a moment Jim was handicapped in fleetness and agility by the fact that his arms were hampered. But the two hideous guards, though each was a dozen times more powerful than any man its size, were handicapped in a chase, too—by the very weight of their enormous mandibles. In their thundering chase after Jim, they resembled nothing so much as two powerful but clumsy battleships chasing a relatively puny but much more agile destroyer.

Behind the great bulk of a paralyzed June bug, Jim halted for a fraction while he tore his arms at last free of the clinging brown stuff. The guards rushed around the June bug at him.

He leaped for the row of hanging cisterns; and there, while he dodged from one to another of the loathsome vats, he thought over a plan that had come to his racing mind. It wasn't much of a plan, and it seemed utterly futile in the face of the odds against him. But he had boasted, before starting this mad adventure, that Man's wits were superior to any bug's. It was

time now to see if his boast had been an empty one.

He feinted toward the far end of the laboratory. The guards, acting always as if they had a dozen eyes instead of none, rushed to prevent this, cutting across his path and closing the exit with clashing jaws.

Jim raced toward the spot where Denny lay. This was within twenty yards of the spot where, behind his ring of guards, the big-brained ruler now cowered. But, while one of the syringe-monsters sent a brown stream blindly toward the leaping, shifting man, no other attacking move was made. The soldiers remained chained to their posts. Jim retrieved his spear—and the first part of his almost hopeless plan had succeeded!

It was good, the feel of that smooth steel. He balanced the ponderous weapon lightly. An ineffective thing against the plates of living armor covering the scissor-mandibles. But it was not against them—at least not directly—that he was planning to use it now!

ONCE more he darted toward the living cisterns. The soldiers followed close behind.

Under the bulging abdomen of the termite containing the reddish acid, Jim halted as though to make a defiant last stand against the guards. They stopped, too, then began to advance on him from either side, more slowly, like two great cats stalking a mouse.

Muscles bunched for a lightning-quick move, eyes narrowed to mere slits as he calculated distances and fractions of a second, Jim stood there beneath the great acid vat. The mandibles were almost within slicing distance now.

The guards opened wide their tremendous jaws, forming two halves of a deadly horn circle that moved swiftly to encompass him. They leaped . . .

With barely a foot left him, Jim darted back, then poised his spear and shot it straight toward the bulging, live sack that held the acid above the guards.

The acid spurted from the spear hole. Jim clenched his fists and unconsciously held his breath till his chest ached, as the scarlet liquid spread over the great hulks that twisted and fought in ponderous frenzy to untangle legs and antennae and mandibles from the snarl their collision had made of them.

The acid bit through steel and human flesh. On the other hand, it had not harmed the horny flipper of the termite worker that had flicked it onto the garden slug. Did that mean that the flipper was immunized to the stuff, like the lining of the stomach, which is unharmed by acids powerful enough to decompose other organic matter? Or did it mean that *all* horn was untouched by it?

He groaned aloud. The two great insects had drawn apart by now, and had sprung from under the shattered acid vat. Again they were on the trail. The maneuver had been fruitless! The chase was on again, which meant—since he could not hope to elude the blind but ably directed creatures forever—that all hope was lost. . . .

THEN he shouted with triumph. A massive foreleg dropped from one of the guards, to crash to the floor. Whether or not the acid was able to act on the horny exterior of the termites, it was as deadly to their soft interiors as to any other sort of flesh! The acid had found the joint of that foreleg and had eaten through it as hot iron sinks through butter!

Still the injured creature came on, with Jim ever retreating, twisting and dodging from one side of the huge room to the other, leaping over the smaller paralyzed insects

and darting behind the larger carcasses. But now the thing's movements were very slow—as were the movements of its companion.

Another leg fell hollowly to the floor, like an abandoned piece of armor; and then two at once from the second termite.

Both stopped, shuddering convulsively. The agony of those two enormous, dumb and blind things must have been inconceivable. The acid was by now spending its awful force in their vitals, having seeped down through every joint and crevice in their living armor. They were hardly more than huge shells of horn, kept alive only by their unbelievable vitality.

One more feeble lunge both made in concert, toward the puny adversary that had outwitted them. Then both, as though at a spoken command, stopped dead still. Next instant they crashed to the floor, shaking it in their fall.

FOR a second Jim could only stand there and gaze at their monstrous bodies. His plan had succeeded beyond all belief; and realization of that success left him dazed for an instant. But it was only for an instant.

Recovering himself, he raced to the acid vat to recover the spear he'd punctured it with—only three feet of it was left: the rest had been eaten away by the powerful stuff—and then wheeled to help Denny.

By now the crackling brown stuff had fallen from Denny, too—enough, at least for him to struggle to his feet and hasten its cracking by tearing at it with partially loosened hands. As Jim reached him, he freed himself entirely save for the last few bits that stuck to him as bits of shell cling to a newborn chick.

They turned together toward the corner where the termite-ruler was cowering behind the guards that surrounded it. Intellect to a degree phenomenal for an insect, this thing might have; but of the blind fierce courage possessed by its subjects, it assuredly had none! In proof of this was the fact that when the half dozen specialized soldiers ringing it round might have leaped to the aid of the two clumsy door guards and probably have ended the uneven fight in a few minutes, the craven monarch had ordered them to stay at their guard-posts rather than take the risk of remaining unguarded and defenseless for a single moment! Increasing intelligence apparently had resulted (as only too often it does in the world of men) in decreasing bravery!

An attack on the thing, closely guarded as it was, seemed hopeless. Those enormous, flat-topped heads held ready to present their steely surfaces as shields! Those armored terrors with the syringe-heads—one of which still held a full cargo of the terrible brown fluid that at a touch could bind the limbs of the men once more in the straitjacket embrace! What could the two do against that barrier?

NEVERTHELESS, without a word being spoken, and without a second's hesitation, Jim and Denny advanced on the bristling ring—and the heart of termite power it enclosed. Not only was the slimmest of hopes of escape rendered impossible while the super-termite lived to direct its subjects against them—but also they had a reckoning to collect from the thing if they could. . . .

Denny glanced down at his hand, from which slow red drops still oozed.

At their approach, the guarding ring shifted so that the soldier whose head was still bulging with the brown liquid, faced them. The

two men stopped, warily. They must draw the sting from that monster before they dared try to come closer.

Jim feinted, leaping in and to one side. The guard turned with him, moved forward a bit as though to discharge a brown stream at him—but held its fire. Jim moved still closer, then leaped crabwise to one side as the brain behind the guards telepathed in a panic for its blind minion to release some of its ammunition. The flood missed Jim only by inches.

Denny took his turn at gambling with death. He shouted ringingly, and ran a dozen steps straight at the monster that was the principal menace. At the last moment he flung himself aside as Jim had done—but this time the stream was not to be drawn.

Still most of the deadly liquid was left; the thing's head bulged with it. And no real move could be made till that head was somehow emptied.

"Your spear!" panted Denny, who was armed only with the three-foot club which was all that was left of the spear that had entered the acid bag.

Jim nodded. As he had done under the acid vat, he drew it back for a throw—and shot it forward with all the power of his magnificent shoulders.

The glittering length of steel slashed into the flabby, living syringe. A fountain of molasseslike liquid gushed out.

THE move had not been elaborately reasoned out; it had been a natural, almost instinctive one, simply a blow struck for the purpose of draining the dread reservoir of its sticky contents. But the results—as logical and inevitable as they were astounding and unforeseen—were such that the move could not have been wiser had all the gods of war conspired to help the two men with shrewd advice.

The searching spear-point had evidently found the brain behind the syringe of the thing; for it reared in an agony that could only have been that of approaching death, and ran amuck.

No longer did the ruling brain that crouched behind it have the power to guide its movements, it seemed. The telepathic communications had been snapped with that crashing spear-point. It charged blindly, undirected, in havoc-wreaking circles. And in an instant the whole aspect of the battle had been changed.

The ring of living armor presented by the other soldiers was broken as the enormous, dying termite charged among them. Furthermore, the fountain of thick brown liquid exuding from its head, smeared the limbs of the soldiers the blind, crazed thing touched, as well as its own.

In thirty seconds or less the wounded giant was down, still alive, but wriggling feebly in a binding sheath of its own poison. And with it, so smeared as to be utterly out of the struggle, were three of the others.

Quick to seize the advantage, Jim leaped to wrench his spear from the conquered giant's head. And side by side he and Denny started again the charge against the ruler's guards, which, while still mighty in defense, were by their very nature unable to attack.

THREE of these guards were left. Two of them were the freaks with the great, armored, bung-heads—and the soft and vulnerable bodies. The third was of the syringe type, with invulnerable horn breastplate and body armor—but with a head that, now its fatal liquid was exhausted, was useless in battle.

"Take 'em one by one," grunted Jim, setting the example by swinging his spear at the body of the nearest guard. "We'll get at that damn thing with the overgrown brains yet!"

His spear clanged on iron-hard horn as the termite swung its unwieldy head to protect its unarmored body. The force of the contact tore the spear from his hand; but almost before it could drop, he had recovered it. And in that flashing instant Denny had darted in at the side of the thing and half disembowelled it with a thrust of the acid-blunted point of his three-foot bar, and a lightninglike wrench up and to the side.

"Only two left!" cried Jim, stabbing at the flabby head of the syringe-monster that loomed a foot above his own head. "We'll do it yet, Denny!"

But at that moment a clashing and rattling at the doorway suddenly burst in on the din of the fiery fight. Both men stared at each other with surrender in their eyes.

"Now we are all through!" yelled Jim, almost calm in his complete resignation. "But we'll try to reach that devilish thing before we're downed!"

IN the heat of the swift, deadly fray, the two men had forgotten for the moment that these few soldiers ranged against them were not all the fighters in the mound city. But the quaking intellect they were striving to reach had not forgotten! At some time early in the one-sided struggle it had sent out a soundless call to arms. And now, in the doorway, struggling to force through in numbers too great for the entrance's narrow limits, were the first of the soldier hordes the ruler had commanded to report here for fight duty. And behind them, as far as the eye could see, the tunnel was blocked by yet others marching to kill the creatures that menaced their leader. The abortive effort at escape, it seemed, was doomed.

The strength of desperation augmented Jim's naturally massive muscular power. He whirled his spear high over his head, clubwise. Disdaining now to try for a thrust behind and to one side of the great conical head that faced him, he brought the bar down with sledge-hammer force on the horn-plated thing.

As though it had been a willow wand, the big bar whistled through the air in its descent. With a crack that could be heard even above the crashing mandibles of the soldiers pouring across the hundred-yard floor toward the scene of battle, the bar landed on the living buckler of a head.

The head could not have been actually harmed. But the brain behind it was patently jarred and numbed for an instant. The great creature stood still, its head weaving slowly back and forth. Jim swung his improvised club in another terrific arc. . . .

DENNY darted around behind the ponderously wheeling bulk of the last remaining guard to the team of worker termites. He, too, swung his arms high—over the bloated brain-bag that cowered down between the backs that bore it—leaping here and there to avoid the blunt mandibles of the burden bearers. He, too, brought down his three-foot length of bar with all the force he could muster, the sight of that swollen, hideous head atop the withered remnants of termite body lending power to his muscles.

And now, just as the nearest of the soldiers reached out for them, the termite-ruler lay helpless on the backs of its living crutches, with its attenuated body quivering convulsively, and its balloonlike, fragile

head cleft almost in two halves. It was possible that even that terrific injury might not be fatal to a thing so great and flexible of brain, and so divorced from the ills as well as the powers of the flesh. But for the moment at least it was helpless, an inert mass on the patient backs of the termite team.

"To the acid vat," snapped Jim. "We'll make our last stand there."

Dodging the nearest snapping mandibles, Denny ran beside his companion to where the termite, dead now, with its distended abdomen deflated and the last of the acid trickling from the hole caused by Jim's spear, still hung head down from the ceiling.

The powerful ruler of this vast underground city was crushed—for the moment at least. But the fate of the two humans seemed no less certain than it it had before. For now the huge chamber was swarming with the giant soldiers. In numbers so great that they crashed and rattled against each other as they advanced, they marched toward the place where the broken monarch still quivered in weak convulsions—and behind which, near the acid vat, the two men crouched.

CHAPTER IX

The Cannibalistic Orgy

AT first Jim and Dennis could only comprehend the *numbers* of the foe—could only grip their bars and resolve to die as expensively as possible. But then, as a few seconds elapsed during which they were amazingly not charged by the insects, they began to notice the *actions* of the things.

They were swarming so thickly about the spot where their leader had fallen that all the men could see was their struggling bodies. And the movements of these soldiers were puzzling in the extreme.

The things seemed, of a sudden, to be fighting among themselves! At any rate, they were not hurrying to attack the unique, two-legged bugs by the deflated acid bag.

Instead, they seemed to be having a monstrous attack of colic as they rolled about their vanquished monarch. With their antennae weaving wildly, and their deadly jaws crashing open and shut along the floor, they were fairly wallowing about that section. And the crowding ring of soldiers surrounding the wallowers were fighting like mad things to shove them out of place.

Over each other they struggled and rolled, those on the top and sides of the solid mass pressing to get in and down. In stark astonishment, the two men watched the inexplicable conflict—and wondered why they had not already been rushed and sliced to pieces by the steely, ten-foot mandibles.

In Dennis' mind, as he watched, wide-eyed, the crazy battle of the monsters around the spot, a memory struggled to be recognized. He had seen something vaguely like this before, on the upper earth. what was it?

Abruptly he remembered what it was. And with the recollection—and all the possibilities of deliverance it suggested—he shouted aloud and clutched Jim's arm with trembling fingers.

THAT scene of carnage suggested to his mind the day he had seen a cloud of vultures fighting over the carcass of a horse in the desert. The mad pushing, the slashing and rending of each other as all fought for the choice morsels of dead flesh! It was identical.

The termites, he knew, were deliberately cannibalistic. A race so efficiently run, so ingenious in letting nothing of possible value go to waste, would almost inevitably be trained to consume the bodies of

dead fellow beings. And now—now. . . .

The gruesome monarch, that thing of monstrous brain and almost nonexistent body, was no longer the monarch. It was either dead, or utterly helpless. In that moment of death or helplessness—was it being fallen upon and eaten by the horde of savage things it normally ruled? Did the termite hordes make a practice of devouring their helpless and worn-out directing-brains as it was known they devoured all their worn-out, no longer potent queens?

It certainly looked as if that was what the leaderless horde of soldiers was doing here! Or, at any rate, trying to do; accustomed to being fed by the workers, with mandibles too huge to permit of normal self-feeding, they would probably be able to hardly more than strain clumsily after the choice mass beneath them and absorb it in morsels so small as to be more a source of baffled madness than of satisfaction.

Which latter conjecture seemed certainly to support the theory that the soldier termites were not trying to help their fallen monarch, but were trampling and slashing it to death in an effort to devour it!

"Quick!" snapped Denny, realizing that it was a chance that must not be overlooked; that even if he were wrong, they might as well die trying to get to the doorway as be crushed to death where they stood. "Run to the exit!"

"Through that nightmare army?" said Jim, astounded. "Why, we haven't a chance of making it!"

"Come, I say!" Denny dragged him a few feet by main force. "I hope—I believe—we won't be bothered. If a pair of jaws crushes us, it will probably be by accident and not design—the brutes are too busy to bother about us now."

Still gazing at Denny as though he thought him insane, Jim tarried no longer. He began to edge his way, by Denny's side, toward the distant door.

IN a very few feet Denny's theory was proved right. None of the gigantic insects tried to attack them. But even so that journey to the exit, a distance of more than the length of a football field, was a ghastly business.

On all sides the giant, armored bodies rushed and shoved. The clash of horn breastplates against armored legs, of mandibles and granitic heads against others of their kind, was ear-splitting. The monsters, in their effort to indulge the cannibalistic instinct—at once so horrible to the two humans, and so fortunate for them—were completely heedless of their own welfare and everything else.

Like giant ice cakes careening in the break-up of a flood, they crunched against each other; and like loose ice cakes in a flood, every now and then one was forced clear up off its feet by the surrounding rush, to fall back to the floor a moment later with a resounding crash.

It would seem an impossibility for any two living things as relatively weak and soft as men to find a way through such a maelstrom. Yet—Jim and Denny did.

Several times one or the other was knocked down by a charging, blind monster. Once Denny was almost caught and crushed between two of the rock-hard things. Once Jim only saved himself from a pair of terrific, snapping jaws that rushed his way, by using his short spear as a pole and vaulting up and over them onto the monster's back, where he was allowed to slide off unheeded as the maddened thing continued in its rush. But they reached the door!

There they gazed fearfully down

the corridor, sure there would be hundreds more of the soldiers crowding to answer the last call of their ruling, master mind. But only a few stragglers were to be seen, and these, called to the grim feast by some sort of instinct or perhaps some sense of smell, rushed past with as little attempt to attack them as the rest.

The two men ran down the tunnel, turned a corner into an ascending tunnel they remembered from their trip in, raced up this, hearts pounding wildly with the growing hope of actually escaping from the mound with their lives—and then halted. Jim cursed bitterly, impotently.

BRANCHING off from this second tunnel, all looking exactly alike and all identical in the degree of their upward slant, were five more tunnels! Like spokes of a wheel, they radiated out and up; and no man could have told which to take. They stopped, in despair, as this phase of their situation, unthought of till now, was brought home to them.

"God! The place is a labyrinth! How can we ever find our way out?" groaned Jim.

"All we can do is keep going on—and up," said Denny, with a shake of his head.

At random, they picked the center of the five underground passages, and walked swiftly along it. And now they began to come in contact again with the normal life of the vast mound-city.

Here soldiers were patrolling up and down with seeming aimlessness, while near-by workers labored at shoring up collapsing sections of tunnel wall, or at carrying staggering large loads of food from one unknown place to another. But now there seemed to be a certain lack of system, of coordination in the movements of the termites.

"Damned funny these soldiers aren't joining in the rush with the rest to get to the laboratory in answer to the command of the ruler," said Jim, warily watching lest one of the gigantic guards end the queer truce and rush them. "And look at the way the workers move—just running aimlessly back and forth with their loads. I don't get it."

"I THINK I do," said Denny. He pitched his voice low, and signed for Jim to walk more slowly, on tiptoe. "These soldiers aren't with the rest because only a certain number was called. It's simple mathematics: if all the soldiers in the mound tried to get in that room back there where the ruler was, they'd get jammed immovably in the tunnels near-by. The king-termite, with all the astounding reasoning power it must have had, called only as many as could crowd in, in order to avoid a jam in which half the soldiers in the city might be killed.

"As for the aimless way the workers are moving—you forget they haven't a leader any more. They are working by habit and instinct only, carrying burdens, building new wall sections, according to blind custom alone, and regardless of whether the carrying and building are necessary."

"In that case," sighed Jim, "we'd have a good chance to getting out of here—if we could only find the path!"

"I'm sure we can find the path, and I'm sure we can get out," said Denny confidently. "For in a mound of this size there must be many paths leading to the upper world, and there is no reason—with the omnipotent ruling brain dead and eaten—why any of these creatures should try to stop or fight us."

"Which was good logic—but which left entirely out of consideration

that one factor which man so often forgets but is still inevitably governed by: the unpredictable whims of fate. For on their way out they were to blunder into the one place in all the mound which was—death or no death of the ruling power—absolutely deadly to them; and were to arouse the terrible race about them to frenzies that were based, not on any reasoned thought processes, or which in any case they were of themselves incapable, but on the more grim and fanatic foundations of unreasoned, primal, outraged instinct.

CHAPTER X

The Termite Queen

THE slope of the upward-leading tunnels had become less noticeable, from which fact the two men reasoned hopefully that they were near ground level. And now they began to see termite workers bearing a new sort of burden: termite eggs, sickly looking lumps that had only too obviously been newly laid.

A file of workers approached, in a long line, each with an egg, looking for all the world like a file of human porters bearing the equipment of a jungle expedition. Slowly, the things moved—carefully—bound for some such vast incubator as the one Jim and Dennis had stumbled into some hours before.

"We want to go in the opposite direction from them," Denny whispered. "They're coming from the Queen termite's den—and we don't want to blunder in there!"

They about-faced, and moved with the workers till they came to the nearest passage branching away from the avenue on which the file marched. Denny dabbed at his forehead.

"Lucky those things came in time to warn us," he said. "From what little science knows of the termites, I can guess that the Queen's chamber would be a chamber of horrors for us!"

They walked on, searching for another main avenue, such as the one they had left, which might be an artery leading to the outside world. But they had not gone far when they were again forced to change their course.

Ahead of them, marching in regular formation, came a band of soldiers larger than the usual squad. They filled the tunnel so compactly that the two men did not dare try to squeeze past them.

"Here," whispered Jim, pointing to a side tunnel.

THEY stole down it; but in a moment it developed that their choice had been an unlucky one: the crash of the heavy, armored bodies continued to follow them. The soldiers had turned down that tunnel, too.

"Are they after us again?" whispered Jim.

Denny shrugged. There was still a remnant of the disguising termite-paste on their bodies to fool the insects. It seemed impossible that the ruling brain behind them had survived the cannibalistic rush and taken command of the mound again? But—was anything impossible in this world of terror?

Steadily the two were forced to retreat before the measured advance of the guards. And now the tunnel they were in broadened—and abruptly ended in another of the vast chambers that seemed to dot the mound city at fairly regular intervals. But this one appeared to be humming with activity, if the noise coming from within it was any indication.

The two paused at the threshold, dismayed at the evidence of superactivity in the chamber ahead of them. But while they paused there,

the soldiers behind them rounded a corner. They could not go back. There were no more of the opportune side entrances to dodge into. All they could do was retreat still farther—into the vast room before them.

They did so, reluctantly, moving step by step as the marching band behind them crashed rhythmically along. But once inside the great chamber, they shrank back against the wall with whispered imprecations at the final, desperate trick fate had played on them.

Their path of retreat, leading around labyrinthine corners and by-passages, had doubled back on them without their having been aware of it. They were in the very place Dennis had wished so much to avoid—the chamber of the Queen termite!

HIGH overhead, almost lost in the dimness, was the arching roof. Around the circular walls were innumerable tunnel entrances. At each of these stood a termite guard—picked soldiers half again as large as the ordinary soldiers, with mandibles so great and heavy that it was a marvel the insects could support them.

Hurrying here and there were worker termites. And these were centering their activities on an object as fearful as anything that ever haunted the mind of a madman.

Up and back, this object loomed, half filling the enormous room like a zeppelin in a hangar. And like a zeppelin—a blunt, bloated zeppelin—the object was circular and tapered at both ends. But the zeppelin was a living thing—a horrible travesty of life.

At the end facing the two men was a tiny dot of a head, almost lost in the whitish mass of the enormous body. Around this a clutter of worker termites pressed, giving nourishment to the insatiable mouth. At the far end of the vast shape another cluster of termites thronged. And these bore away a constant stream of termite eggs—that dripped from the zeppelinlike, crammed belly at the rate of almost one a second.

Her Highness, the Queen—two hundred tons of flabby, greasy flesh, immobile, able only to eat and lay eggs.

"My God," whispered Jim. Utterly unstrung, he gazed at that mighty, loathsome mass, listening to its snapping jaws as it took on the tons of nourishment needed for its machinelike functioning. "My God!"

INSTINCTIVELY he whirled to run back through the entrance they had come through. But now, with the admittance of the soldier band that had pressed them in here, the entrance was guarded again by one of the giants permanently stationed there.

"What had we better do?" he breathed to Denny.

Dennis stared helplessly around. He had noticed that the termites in here were acting differently from the others they had encountered since leaving the lair of the termite-ruler. These were moving uneasily, restlessly, stopping now and again with waving, inquisitive antennae. It looked ominously as though they had sensed the presence of intruders here in the sanctum where their race was born, and were dimly wondering what to do.

"We might try each tunnel mouth, one by one, on the chance that we can find a careless guard somewhere," Dennis muttered at last. "But for heaven's sake don't touch any of the brutes! I think that at the slightest signal the whole mob of the things would spring on us and tear us to pieces. Most of the paste is rubbed off by now."

Jim nodded. He had no desire to brush against one of the colossal, special guard of soldiers if he could help it, or against any of the relatively weak workers that might give the signal of alarm.

Stealing silently along among the blind, instinctively agitated monsters, they worked a circuitous way from one exit to another. But nowhere did any chance of getting out of the place present itself. Across each tunnel mouth was placed one of the enormous guards, twelve-feet mandibles opened like a waiting steel trap.

Halfway around the tremendous room they went, without mishap, but also without finding an exit they could slip through. And then, in the rear of the vast bulk of the Queen, it happened.

ONE of the worker termites, bearing an egg in its mandibles, faltered, and dropped its precious burden. The thing fell squashily to the floor within a foot of Jim, who had brushed against the wall to let the burden bearer pass without touching him. Jim, attempting to sidestep away from the spot, as the worker put out blind feelers to search for the dropped egg, lost his balance for a fraction of a second—and stepped squarely on the nauseous ovoid!

Frantically he stepped out of the mess he had created, and the two stood staring at each other, holding their breaths, fearful of what might result from that accidental destruction of budding termite life.

The worker, feeling about for its burden, came in contact with the shattered egg. It drew back abruptly, as though in perplexity: soft; and tough, the egg should not have broken merely from being dropped. Then it felt again. . . .

For a few seconds nothing whatever occurred. The two breathed again, and began to hope that their fears had been meaningless. But that was not to be.

The worker termite finally began to rush back and forth, antennae whipping from side to side, patently trying to discover the cause of the tragedy. And Jim and Dennis rushed back and forth, too, engaged in a deadly game of blind man's buff as they tried to avoid the questing antennae—which, registering sensation by touch instead of smell, was not to be fooled by the last disappearing traces of the termite-paste.

The game did not last long. One of the feelers whipped against Dennis' legs—and hell broke loose!

THE worker emitted a sound like the shriek of a circular saw gone wild. And on the instant all its fellows, and the gigantic guards at the exits, stiffened to rigid attention.

Again came the roaring sound, desolate, terrible, at once a call to arms and a funeral dirge. And now every termite in the dim, cavernous chamber began the battle dance Jim and Dennis had seen performed by the termite guard when it was confronted by the horde of ants. Not moving their feet, they commenced to sway back and forth, while long, rhythmic shudders convulsed their grotesque bodies. It was a formal declaration of war against whatever mad things had dared invade the fountain-spring of their race.

Jim and Dennis leaped toward the nearest exit, determined to take any risk on the chance of escaping from the horde of things now aware of their presence and ravening for their blood. But in this exit—the only one accessible to them now—the guard had commenced the jaw-clashing that closed openings more efficiently than steel plates could have done. An attempt to pass those enormous mandibles

presented no risk; what it presented was suicide.

By now the dread war dance had stopped. All the termites in the chamber were converging slowly toward the spot where the termite had given the rasping alarm. Even the workers, ordinarily quick to run from danger, were advancing instead of retreating. Of all living things in the room only the Queen, unable to move her mountainous bulk, did not join in the slow, sure move to slash to pieces the hated trespassers.

Again the questing antennae of the worker that had given the alarm touched one of the men. With a deafening rasp it sprang toward them, blind but terrible.

DENNIS swung his steel club. It clashed against the scarcely less hard mandibles of the worker, not harming them, but seeming to daze the insect a little.

Jim followed the act by plunging his longer spear into the soft body. No words were wasted by the two men. It was a fight for life again, with the odds even more heavily against them than they had been in the ruler's lair.

Behind them, blocking the only exit they had any chance whatever of reaching, the guard continued its clashing mandible duty. If only it, too, would join in the blind search for the trespassers, thus giving them an opportunity of slipping out! But the monster gave no indication of doing such a thing.

Another worker termite flung its bulk at them. Its mandibles, tiny in comparison with those of the great guards but still capable of slicing either of the men in two, snapped perilously close to Jim's body. There was a second's concerted action: Dennis' club lashed against the thing's head, Jim's spear tore into the vulnerable body.

Ringing them round, the main band of the termites moved closer. They moved slowly, in no hurry, apparently only too sure the enemy could not possibly get away from them. And the two worker termites killed were mere incidents compared to the avalanche of mandible and horn that would be on them in about thirty seconds.

HOWEVER, the two dead termites gave Jim a sudden inspiration. He glanced from the carcasses to the mechanically moving, deadly jaws of the guard that barred the nearest exit.

"Denny," he panted, "feed it this."

He pointed first toward the nearest carcass and then toward the rock-crushing, steadily snapping jaws.

"I'll try to hold the bridge here—"

But Dennis was on his way, catching Jim's idea with the first gesture.

He stooped down, and caught the dead termite by two of its legs. Close to two hundred pounds the mass weighed; but strength is an inconstant thing, and increases or decreases according to the vital needs of life-preservation.

Clear of the floor, Denny lifted the bulk, and with its repulsive weight clasped in his arms, he advanced toward the mighty guard.

Behind him, Jim glared desperately at the third termite that was about to attack. No feeble worker this, but one of the most colossal of all the Queen's guard.

Towering over Jim, mandibles wide open and ready to smash over its prey, the giant reared toward him. And behind him came the main body of the horde. It was painfully evident that the clash with the lone soldier would be the last single encounter. After that the hundreds of the herd would be on the men, tearing and trampling them to bits.

During the thing's steady, inexorable approach, which had taken far less time than that required to tell of it, Jim had clenched his fingers around his spear and calculated as to the best way to hold the monster off for just the few seconds needed by Denny to try the plan suggested.

The monster ended its slow advance in a lunge that, for all its great bulk, was lightning quick. But a shade more quickly, Jim sidestepped the terrible mandibles, leaped back along the armored body till he had reached the unarmored rear, and thrust his spear home with all his force.

THE hideous guard reared with pain and rage. But this was no worker termite, to be killed with a thrust As though nothing had happened, the huge hulk wheeled around. The mandibles crashed shut with deafening force over the space Jim had occupied but an instant before.

And now the inner circle of the multiple ring of death was within a few yards. Jim leaped to put himself behind the living barrier of the attacking soldier. But it was only a matter of a few seconds now, before he and Denny would be caught in the blind bull charges of the wounded soldier or by the surrounding ring of maddened termites.

"Denny?" he shouted imploringly over his shoulder, not daring to take his eyes off the danger in front of him.

"Soon!" he heard Dennis pant.

The entomologist had got almost up to the twelve-foot jaws that closed the exit. He paused a moment, gathering strength. Then he heaved the soft mass of the dead termite into the clashing mandibles.

"Jim!" he cried, as the burden left his arms.

Jim turned, raced the few yards intervening between the ring of death and the doorway. Together they waited to see if their forlorn hope would work. . . .

It could not have lasted more than a second, that wait, yet it seemed at least ten minutes. And then both cried aloud — and crouched to repeat the maneuver that had saved them from death when they had first entered this insect hell.

For the enormous, smashing jaws had caught the body of the worker termite with ferocious eagerness, and were worrying the inanimate carcass with terrible force.

The great jaws were occupied just an instant before the monster sensed that it was one of his own kind that he was mangling so thoroughly. But in that instant Jim had slid on his chest along the floor past the armored head and shoulders, and Dennis had leaped to follow.

But Dennis was not to get off so lightly.

THE charging ring of termites had closed completely in by now. The snapping mandibles of the nearest one were up to him. They opened; shut.

They caught Denny on the back swing, knocking him six feet away instead of slicing him wide open. Denny got to his feet almost before he had landed; but between him and the exit was the bulk of the termite that had felled him, and in the doorway the guard had dropped the body it was slashing to bits, and had recommenced its slashing jaw movements.

"Jim! For God's sake. . . ." shrieked the doomed man.

Beside himself, he managed to hurdle clear over the massive insect between him and the doorway. But there he stopped, with the guard's great mandibles fanning the air less

than a foot from him. "Jim!" came the agonized cry again.

And behind the gigantic termite, in the tunnel, with at least a possibility of safety lying open before him, Jim heard and answered the call.

Savagely he plunged his spear into the unarmored rear of the guard, tore it out, thrust again. . . .

The thing heaved and struggled to turn, shaking the tunnel with its raging anger—and taking its attention at last away from the duty of closing that tunnel mouth.

With no room to run and slide, Denny fell to the floor and commenced to creep through the narrow space between the trampling guard's bulk and the wall. He felt his left arm and shoulder go numb as he was crushed for a fleeting instant against the wood partition. Broken, he thought dimly. The collar-bone. But still he kept moving on.

HE moved in a haze of pain and weakness. He did not see that he had passed clear of the menacing bulk—that his slow crawling had been multiplied in results by the fact that the termite guard had finally stopped trying to turn in the narrow passage and had rushed ahead into the Queen's chamber, to turn there and come dashing back. He did not see that Jim was finally disarmed and completely helpless, with his spear buried beyond recovery in the bulk of the maddened guard. He hardly felt Jim's supporting arm as it was thrust under his, to half drag and half lead him along the tunnel away from the horde behind.

He only knew that they were moving forward, with the din behind them—as the grim cohorts of the Queen fought to all crowd ahead in the narrow passage at once—keeping pace with them in spite of all they could do to make haste. And he only knew that finally Jim gave a great shout, and that suddenly they were standing under a rent in a tunnel roof through which sunlight was pouring.

Several worker termites were laboring to close up the chink and cut off the sunlight; but these, not being of the band outraged by the destruction of the egg in the Queen's chamber, moved swiftly away as the two men advanced.

Jim reached up and tore with frantic hands at the crumbling edges of the rotten wood overhead. Ignoring his gashed and bleeding fingers, he widened the breach till he could pull himself up through it. Then he reached down, caught Denny's sound arm, and raised him by main strength.

They were in the clear air of the outer world once more, on a terrace in the mound low down near its base.

Jim and Dennis half slid, half fell down the near terrace slope to the jungle of grass stalks beneath. And there Denny bit his lip sharply, struggled against the weakness overcoming him—and fainted.

JIM caught him up over his shoulder, and staggered forward through the jungle. Behind, the termites poured out through the broken wall in an enraged flood, braving even the sunlight and outer air in their chase of the invaders that had profaned the Queen's chamber.

"Matt!" shouted Jim with all the strength of his lungs, forgetting that his voice could not be heard by normal human ears. "Matt!"

But if Matthew Breen could not hear, he could see. The slightest inattention at his guard duty at that second would have resulted in two deaths. But he was on the alert.

Jim saw the sun blotted out swiftly, saw a huge, pinkish-gray wall swoop down between him and

Denny, and the deadly horde of termites pursuing them. Then he saw another pinkish gray wall, in which was set something—a shallow, regular, hollowed plateau—that looked familiar. The patty-dish in which he and Denny had been carried to this place of death and horror.

Jim knew he could not clamber into that great plateau: he was too exhausted. But the necessity was spared him.

The patty-dish scooped down under him, uprooting huge trees, digging up square yards of earth all around him. He was flung from his feet, to roll helplessly beside the unconscious Dennis, as men and earth and all were shifted from the dish's rim to its center.

Like a gigantic express elevator the dish soared dizzily up in the tremendous hand that held it, over the vast pile of the mound city, over all the surrounding landscape, and was borne back toward Matt's automobile—and toward the laboratory where the bulk of their bodies waited, in protoplasmic form, in the dome of the glass bell.

CHAPTER XI

Back to Normal

"I THINK," said Jim, loading his pipe, "that now I really will settle down. No other adventures could seem like much after the one"—he repressed a shiver—"we've just passed through."

"And I think," said Dennis, following his own line of thought, "that as far as the world of science goes, my exploring has been for nothing. Try to tell sober scientists of the specially evolved, huge-brained thing that rules the termite tribe and forms and holds the marvelous organization it has? Try to tell them—now that Matt has so stubbornly decided to keep secret his work with element eighty-five—that we were reduced to a quarter of an inch in height, and that we went through a mound and saw at first hand the things we describe? They'd shut me in an asylum!"

The two were sitting in Denny's apartment, once more conventionally clothed, and again their normal five feet eleven, and six feet two.

The reassembling of Denny's body had done odd things. Jim had set the broken bone with rough skill before stepping under the glass bell; and the fracture had been healed automatically by the growing deposit of protoplasmic substance resulting when Matt threw his switch.

But Denny's missing finger had baffled the reversing process. With no tiny pattern to form around, the former substance of his finger had simply gathered in a shapeless knob of flesh and bone like a tumorous growth sprouting from his hand. It would have to be amputated.

But the marvels performed under Matthew Breen's glass bell were far secondary to the two men. The things they had recently seen and undergone, and the possibility of telling folks about them, occupied their attention exclusively.

"Then you're not going to write a monograph on the real nature of termites, as you'd planned?" Jim asked Denny.

Denny shrugged dispiritedly. "People would take it for a joke instead of a scientific treatise if I did," he said.

Jim puffed reflectively at his pipe. A thought had come to him that seemed to hold certain elements of possibility.

"Why not do this," he suggested: "Write it up first as a straight story, and see if people will believe it. Then, if they do, you can rewrite it as scientific fact."

And eventually they decided to do just that. And—here is their story.

"Be still! The power of Llano is absolute here!"

Priestess of the Flame

By Sewell Peaslee Wright

I HAVE been rather amused by the protests which have come to me regarding the "disparaging" comments I have made, in previous tales of the Special Patrol Service, regarding women. The rather surprising thing about it is that the larger proportion of these have come from men. Young men, of course.

Now, as a matter of fact, a careful search has failed to reveal to me any very uncomplimentary remarks. I have suggested, I believe, that women have, in my experience, shown a sad lack of ability to understand mechanical contrivances. Perhaps I have pictured some few of them as frivolous and shallow. If I have been unfair, I wish now to make humble apology.

Commander John Hanson recounts the extraordinary story of Llano, Priestess of the Flame.

I am not, as some of my correspondents have indicated, a bitter old man, who cannot remember his youth. I remember it very well indeed, else these tales would not be forthcoming. And women have their great and proper place, even in a man's universe.

Some day, perhaps, the mood will seize me to write of my own love affair. That surprises you? You smile to think that old John Hanson, lately a commander of the Special Patrol Service, now retired, should have had a love affair? Well, 'twas many years ago, before these eyes lost their fire, and before these brown, skinny hands wearied as quickly as they weary now. . . .

But I have known many women—good women and bad; great women and women of small souls; kindly women, and women fierce as wild beasts are fierce. Divinity has dealt lavishly with women; has given them an emotional range far greater than man's. They can sink to depths unknown to masculinity; they can rise to heights of love and sacrifice before which man can only stand with reverently bowed head and marvel.

This is a story of a woman—one of those no man could know and not remember. I make no apologies for her; I pay her no homage. I record only a not inaccurate account of an adventure of my youth, in which she played a part; I leave to you the task of judging her.

WE were some three days out from Base, as I recall it, on a mission which promised a welcome interlude in a monotonous sequence of routine patrols. I was commander then of the *Erratic*, one of the crack ships of the Service, and assisted by the finest group of officers I believe that any man ever had under him.

I was standing a watch in the navigating room with Hendricks, my junior officer, when Correy brought us the amazing news.

Correy was my first officer, a square-jawed fighting man if one ever breathed, a man of action, such as these effete times do not produce. His eyes were fairly blazing as he came into the room, and his generous mouth was narrowed into a grim line.

"What's up, Mr. Correy?" I asked apprehensively. "Trouble aboard?"

"Plenty of it, sir!" he snapped. "A stowaway!"

"A stowaway?" I repeated wonderingly. A new experience, but hardly cause for Correy's obvious anger. "Well, send him below, and tell Mirc to put him to work—the hardest work he can find. We'll make him—"

"*Him?*" blurted Correy. "If it were a him it wouldn't be so bad, sir. But it's a *she!*"

TO understand the full effect of the statement, you'd have to be steeped in the traditions of the Service. Women are seldom permitted on board a ship of the Service; despite their many admirable qualities women play the very devil with discipline. And here were we, three days out from Base on a tour of duty which promised more than a little excitement, with a female stowaway on board!

I felt my own mouth set grimly.

"Where is she, Mr. Correy?" I asked quietly.

"In my quarters, under guard. It was my watch below, as you know, sir. I entered my stateroom, figuring on catching forty winks, and there she was, seated in my big chair, smiling at me.

"Well, for a second I couldn't speak. I just stared at her, and she kept smiling back at me. 'What are you doing here?' I managed to ask her, at last. 'Do you know where you are?'

"'I'll talk to your commanding officer,' she told me, cool as you please. 'Will you bring him, please?'

"'You'll see him plenty soon

enough," I snapped at her, getting over my surprise somewhat by that time. I called in a couple of men to keep her from getting into mischief, and reported to you. What are your orders, sir?"

I hesitated a second, wondering. From Correy's account, she must be a rather remarkable person.

"Bring her up here, if you will, Mr. Correy. I'd like to see her before we put her in the brig." The brig, I might explain, was a small room well forward, where members of the crew were confined for discipline.

"Right, sir!" It seemed to me that there was a peculiar twinkle in Correy's eyes as he went out, and I wondered about it while we waited for him to return with the prisoner.

"What an infernal nuisance, sir!" complained Hendricks, looking up from his glowing charts. "We'll be the laughing-stock of the Service if this leaks out!"

"*When* it leaks out," I corrected him glumly. I'd already thought of the unpleasant outcome he mentioned. "I'll have to report it, of course, and the whole Service will know about it. We'll just have to grin and make the most of it, I guess." There was still another possibility which I didn't mention: the silver-sleeves at Base would very likely call me on the carpet for permitting such a thing to happen. A commander was supposed to be responsible for everything that happened; no excuses available in the Service as it was in those days.

I SCOWLED forbiddingly as I heard Correy open the door; at least I could make her very sorry she had selected the *Errak* for her adventure. I am afraid, however, that it was a startled, rather than a scowling face to which she lifted her eyes.

"This is the stowaway, sir," said Correy briskly, closing the door. He was watching my face, and I saw, now, the reason for the twinkle in his eye when I mentioned placing the stowaway in the brig.

The woman was startlingly beautiful; one of the most beautiful women I have ever seen, and I have roamed the outer limits of space, and seen the women of many worlds. Hendricks, standing behind me, gasped audibly as his eyes fell upon her.

The stowaway was regally tall and exquisitely modeled. Her hair was the color of pale morning sunlight on Earth; her eyes an amazing blue, the equal of which I have never seen.

She was beautiful, but not coldly so. Despite her imperious bearing, there was something seductive about the soft curves of her beautiful body; something to rouse the pulses of a man in the langour of her intensely blue eyes, and the full, sensuous lips, scarlet as a smear of fresh blood.

"So this is the stowaway," I said, trying to keep my voice coolly indifferent. "What is your name?"

"I should prefer," she replied, speaking the universal language with a sibilant accent that was very fascinating, "to speak with you privately."

"You will speak with me," I informed her crisply, "in the presence of these officers. I repeat: what is your name?"

She smiled faintly, her eyes compelling mine.

"I am called Liane," she said. "Chief Priestess of the Flame, Mother of Life, Giver of Death. I believe my name and position are not unknown to you, Commander Hanson?"

KNOWN to me? If Base was not in error—and for all their faults, the silver-sleeves are seldom wrong in matters of this sort—this woman was the reason for our present mission.

"They are known to me," I admitted. "They do not explain, however, your presence here."

"And yet they should," protested Liane gently. "I was taken from my

own people by those who had no right to command me. I was subjected to the indignity of questioning by many men. I have merely taken the simplest and quickest way of returning to my own people."

"You knew, then, our destination?"

"I was informed of that by those who questioned me," nodded Liane.

"Then, since I had been assured I was an honored guest, and no prisoner, I secreted myself aboard the ship, hiding in a small room nearly filled with what I took to be spare parts. I had provisions, and a few personal belongings. When I felt sufficient time had elapsed to make a return improbable, I donned attire more fitting than the masculine workman's guise in which I had secreted myself, and—I believe you are acquainted with the remaining facts."

"I am. I will consider your case and advise you later. Mr. Correy, will you conduct the stowaway to my quarters and place her under guard? Return when you have attended to this matter, and ask Mr. Kincaide to do likewise."

"To your quarters, you said, sir?" asked Correy, his eyes very serious, but not sufficiently so to entirely disguise the twinkle in their depths. "Not to the brig?"

I could cheerfully have kicked him.

"To my quarters," I repeated severely, "and under guard."

"Right, sir," said Correy.

WHILE we were awaiting Correy and Kincaide, I briefly considered the rather remarkable story which had been told me at Base.

"Commander Hanson," the Chief of Command, had said, "we're turning over to you a very delicate mission. You've proved yourself adept at handling matters of this kind, and we have every confidence you'll bring this one to a highly successful conclusion."

"Thank you, sir; we'll do our best," I had told him.

"I know that; the assurance isn't necessary, although I appreciate it. Briefly, here's what we're confronted with:

"Lakos, as you know, is the principal source of temite for the universe. And without temite, modern space travel would be impossible; we would have to resort to earlier and infinitely more crude devices. You realize that, of course.

"Now, for some time, those in charge of operations on Lakos have complained of a growing unrest, increasing insubordination on the part of the Lakonians, and an alarming decrease in production.

"It has been extremely difficult—indeed, impossible—to determine the reasons for this, for, as you are perhaps aware, the atmosphere of Lakos is permeated with certain mineral fumes which, while not directly harmful to those of other worlds, do serve to effectively block the passage of those rays of the sun which are essential to the health of beings like ourselves. Those in charge of operations there are supplied artificially with these rays, as you are in your ship, by means of emanations from ethon tubes, but they have to be transferred at frequent periods to other fields of activity. The constant shifting about produces a state of disorder which makes the necessary investigation impossible. Too, operations are carried on with an insufficient personnel, because it is extremely difficult to induce desirable types of volunteer for such disagreeable service.

"WE have, however, determined a few very important facts. This unrest has been caused by the activities of a secret organization or order known as the Worshipers of the Flame. That's as close a translation as I can give you. It sounds harmless enough, but from

what we gather, it is a sinister and rather terrible organization, with a fanatical belief amounting, at times, to a veritable frenzy. These Lakonians are a physically powerful but mentally inadequate people, as perhaps you are aware.

"The leader of this order or cult call it what you will—seems to be a woman: a very fascinating creature, infinitely superior to her people as a whole; what biologists call a 'sport,' I believe—a radical departure from the general racial trend.

"This leader calls herself Liane, Chief Priestess of the Flame, Mother of Life, Giver of Death, and a few other high-sounding things. We have called her here to Base for questioning, and while she has been here some time, we have so far learned next to nothing from her. She is very intelligent, very alluring, very feminine—but reveals nothing she does not wish to reveal.

"Our purpose in having her brought here was two-fold: first, to gain what information we could from her, and if possible, prevail upon her to cease her activities; second, to deprive her cult of her leadership while you conducted your investigation.

"Your orders, then, are simple: you will proceed at once to Lakos, and inquire into the activities of this order. Somehow, it must be crushed; the means I shall leave to you. You will have complete coöperation of those in charge of operations on Lakos; they are Zenians and natives of Earth, and you may depend upon them implicitly. Do not, however, place any faith in any Lakonians: the entire native populace may well be suspected of participation in the rites of this cult, and they are a treacherous and ruthless people at best. Have you any questions, Commander?"

"None," I had told him. "I have full authority to take any action I see fit?"

"Yes, at your discretion. Of course," he had added rather hastily, "you appreciate the importance of our supply of temite. Only Lakonians can gather it in commercial quantities, under the existing conditions on Lakos, and our reserve supply is not large. We naturally wish to increase production there, rather than endanger it. It's a delicate mission, but I'm trusting you and your men to handle it for us. I know you will."

He had arisen then, smilingly, and offered his hand to me in that gesture which marks a son of Earth throughout the universe, thus bringing the interview to a close.

IN talking the things over with my officers, we had decided the mission promised to be an interesting one, but full of difficulties. The Ertak had set down on Lakos more than once, and we all had unpleasant memories of the place.

The sunlight on Lakos, such as it was, was pale green and thin, lacking in warmth and vitality. The vegetation was flaccid and nearly colorless, more like a mushroom growth than anything else; and the inhabitants were suspicious and unfriendly.

Remembering the typical Lakonians, it was all the more surprising that a gracious creature like Liane could have sprung from their midst. They were a beetle-browed, dark race, with gnarled muscles and huge, knotted joints, speaking a guttural language all their own. Few spoke the universal language.

But Liane, Chief Priestess of the Flame! The image of her kept drifting back to my mind. There was a woman to turn any man's head! And such a turning would be dangerous, for Liane had no soft woman's soul, if I had read her brilliant blue eyes aright.

"Rather a beauty, isn't she, sir?" commented Hendricks as I paused in my restless pacing, and glanced at the two-dimensional charts.

"The stowaway? Rather," I agreed shortly. "And chief instigator of the trouble we've been sent to eliminate."

"That seems almost—almost unbelievable, doesn't it?"

"Why, Mr. Hendricks?"

Correy and Kincaide entered before my junior officer could reply. I think he was rather glad of the excuse for not presenting his reasons.

"Well, sir, she's under guard," reported Correy. "And now what's to be done about her?"

"That," I admitted, "is a question. After all, she's an important personage at home. She was brought to Base as a guest, probably something of a guest of honor, of the Council, I gather. And, considering the work that's cut out for us, it would seem like a poor move to antagonize her unduly. What do you gentlemen think?"

"I think you're right, sir," said Hendricks quickly. "I believe she should be given every consideration."

KINCAIDE, my level-headed second officer, glanced curiously at Hendricks. "I see she's made one friend anyway," he said. "Don't let yourself slip, my boy; I've run across her kind before. They're dangerous."

"Thanks, but the warning's not necessary, Mr. Kincaide," replied Hendricks stiffly, an angry flush mounting to his cheeks. "I merely expressed a requested opinion."

"We'll let that phase of it drop, gentlemen," I cut in sharply, as I saw Kincaide's eyes flash. Trust a woman to stir up strife and ill-feeling! "What shall we do with her?"

"I believe, sir," said Correy, "that we'd be nice to her. Treat her as an honored guest; make the best of a bad situation. If she's what the Chief thought she is, the boss of this outfit we've got to lick, then there's no need of stroking her the wrong way, as I see it."

"And you, Mr. Kincaide?"

"I see no other way out of it. Under the circumstances, we can't treat her like a common culprit; both her position and her sex would prevent."

"Very well, then; we seem to be agreed. We'll find suitable quarters for her—"

"I'll give her mine," put in Hendricks. "Correy will let me double up with him, I imagine."

"Sure," nodded Correy.

Kincaide glanced sharply at Hendricks, but said nothing. I knew, however, that he was thinking just what I was: that my young third officer was in for a bad, bad time of it.

Just how bad, I think neither of us guessed.

LIANE became a member of the officers' mess on the *Errak*. She occupied Hendricks' stateroom, and, I must confess, with uncommon good judgment for a woman, remained there most of the time.

She knew the reason for our mission, but this was one subject we never discussed. Nor did we mention the sect of which, according to the Chief of Command, she was the head. We did talk freely, when brought together at the table, on every other general topic.

Liane was an exceedingly intelligent conversationalist. Her voice was fascinating, and her remarks were always to the point. And she was a very good listener; she paid flattering attention to the most casual remark.

It seemed to me she was particularly gracious to Hendricks. Her strangely arresting blue eyes seldom left his face when he was speaking, and the greater portion of her remarks seemed addressed to him. Naturally, Hendricks responded as a flower responds to the warming rays of the sun.

"We'll do well, sir, to keep a weather eye on the youngster," opined Correy one morning. (I think

I have previously explained that even in the unchanging darkness of space, we divided time arbitrarily into days and nights). "Unless I'm badly mistaken, Hendricks is falling victim to a pair of blue eyes."

"He's young." I shrugged. "We'll be there in two more days, and then we'll be rid of her."

"Yes," nodded Correy, "we'll be there in a couple of days. And we'll be rid of her, I hope. But—suppose it should be serious, sir?"

"What do you mean?" I asked sharply. I had been thinking, rather vaguely, along much the same lines, but to hear it put into words came as rather a shock.

"I hope I'm wrong," said Correy very gravely. "But this Liane is an unusual woman. When I was his age, I could have slipped rather badly myself. Her eyes—that slow smile—they do things to a man.

"At the same time, Liane is supposed to be the head of the thing we're to stamp out; you might say the enemy's leader. And it wouldn't be a good thing, sir, to have a—a friend of the enemy on board the *Ertak*, would it?"

A rebuke rose to my lips, but I checked it. After all, Correy had no more than put into words some fears which had been harassing me.

A TRAITOR—in the Service? Perhaps you won't be able to understand just what that thought meant to those of us who wore the Blue and Silver in those days. But a traitor was something we had never had. It was almost unbelievable that such a thing would ever happen; that it could ever happen. And yet older men than Hendricks had thrown honor aside at the insistence of women less fascinating than Liane.

I had felt the lure of her personality; there was not one of us on board the *Ertak* who had not. And she had not exercised her wiles on any of us save Hendricks; with the shrewdness which had made her the leader she was, she had elected to fascinate the youngest, the weakest, the most impressionable.

"I'll have a talk with him, Mr. Correy," I said quietly. "Probably it isn't necessary; I trust him implicitly, as I am sure you do, and the rest of us."

"Certainly, sir," Correy replied hastily, evidently relieved by the manner in which I had taken his remarks. "Only, he's very young, sir, and Liane is a very fascinating creature."

I kept my promise to Correy the next time Hendricks was on watch.

"We'll be setting down in a couple of days," I commented casually. "It'll be good to stretch our legs again, won't it?"

"It certainly will, sir."

"And I imagine that's the last we'll see of our fair stowaway," I said, watching him closely.

Hendricks' face flushed and then drained white. With the tip of his forefinger he traced meaningless geometrical patterns on the surface of the instrument table.

"I imagine so, sir," he replied in a choked voice. And then, suddenly, in a voice which shook with released emotion, "Oh, I know what you're thinking!" he added. "What you've all been thinking; you, sir, and Correy and Kincaide. Probably the men, too, for that matter.

"But it's not so! I want you to believe that, sir. I may be impressionable, and certainly she is beautiful and—and terribly fascinating; but I'm not quite a fool. I realize she's on the other side; that I can't, that I must not, permit myself to care. You—you do believe that, sir?"

"Of course, lad!" I put my hand reassuringly on his shoulder; his whole body was shaking. "Forget it; forget her as soon as you can. None of us have doubted you for an instant; we just—wondered."

"I could see that; I could feel it.

And it hurt," said my junior officer with shame-faced hesitancy. "But I'll forget her—after she's gone."

I let it go at that. After all, it was a rather painful subject for us both. The next day it did seem that he treated her with less attention; and she noticed it, for I saw the faint shadow of a frown form between her perfect brows, and her glance traveled meditatively from Hendricks' flushed face to my own.

THE next morning, after the first meal of the day, she walked down the passage with me, one slim white hand placed gently within the curve of my arm.

"Mr. Hendricks," she commented softly, "seems rather distraught the last day or so."

"Yes?" I said, smiling to myself, and wondering what was coming next.

"Yes, Commander Hanson." There was just the faintest suggestion of steeliness in her voice now. "I fancy you've been giving him good advice, and painting me in lurid colors. Do you really think so badly of me?" Her hand pressed my arm with warm friendliness; her great blue eyes were watching me with beseeching interest.

"I think, Liane," I replied, "that Mr. Hendricks is a very young man."

"And that I am a dangerous woman?" She laughed softly.

"That, at least," I told her, "your interests and ours are not identical."

"True," she said coolly, pausing before the door of her stateroom. Her hand dropped from my arm, and she drew herself up regally. In the bright flow of the ether tubes overhead, she was almost irresistibly beautiful. "Our interests are not identical, Commander Hanson. They are widely divergent, directly opposed to each other, as a matter of fact. And—may I be so bold as to offer you a bit of advice?"

I bowed, saying nothing.

"Then, don't attempt to meddle with things which are more powerful than you and the forces you control. And—don't waste breath on Mr. Hendricks. Fair warning!"

Before I could ask for more complete explanation, she had slipped inside her stateroom and firmly closed the door.

WE set down on Lakos late that afternoon, close to the city—town, rather—of Gio, where those in charge of operations made their headquarters. With Liane and Correy, leaving the ship in charge of Kincaide, I made my way quickly toward the headquarters building.

We had gone but a few steps when Liane was surrounded by a shouting throng of her fellow Lakonians, and with a little mocking wave of a white hand, she stepped into a sort of litter which had been rushed to the scene, and was carried away.

"For one," commented Correy with a sigh of relief, "I'm glad she's out of sight. If I never see her again, it'll be too soon. When do we start something?"

"Not until we've talked with Petter, who's in command here. I have a letter for him from the Chief. We'll see what he has to say."

One thing was certain; we could look for no assistance of any kind from the natives. They regarded us with bleak scowls, from beneath shaggy, lowering brows, our uniforms of blue, with the silver ornaments of our service and rank, identifying us clearly.

In the greenish Lakonian twilight, they were sinister figures indeed, clothed all alike in short, sleeveless tunics, belted loosely at the waist, feet and legs encased in leather buskins reaching nearly to the knees, their brown, gnarled limbs and stoop-shouldered postures giving them a half-bestial semblance which was disturbing. Their walk was a sort of

slow shuffle, which made their long arms dangle, swinging disjointedly.

We entered the administration building of gray, dull stone, and were ushered immediately into the office of the head of operations.

"Hanson?" he greeted me. "Mighty glad to see you. You too, Correy. Terrible hole, this; hope you're not here for long. Sorry I couldn't meet you at the ship; got your radio, but couldn't make it. Everything's in a jam. Getting worse all the time. And we're shorthanded; not half enough men here. Sit down, sit down. Seem good to feel firm ground under your feet?"

"Not particularly; your air here isn't as good as the *Ertak's*." Correy and I seated ourselves across the desk from the garrulous Fetter. "I've a letter here from the Chief; I believe it explains why we're here."

"I can guess, I can guess. And none too soon. Things are in terrible shape. Terrible." Fetter ripped open the letter and glanced through it with harried eyes.

"Right," he nodded. "I'm to help you all I can. Place myself at your disposal. What can I do?"

"Tell us what's up," I suggested. "That would be a long story. I suppose you know something about the situation already. Several reports have gone in to Base. What did the Chief tell you, Hanson?"

BRIEFLY, I sketched the Chief's report, Fetter nodding every few words. When I had finished, he rubbed his long, thin fingers together nervously, and stared down, frowning at the littered top of his desk.

"Right as far as he went," he said. "But he didn't go far enough. Wanted you to find out for yourself, I suppose.

"Well, there *is* a secret society working against us here. Sect, I'd call it. Undermined the whole inhabited portion of Lako—which isn't a great area, as you know.

"The Chief Priestess is Liane. I believe you said she stowed away on the *Ertak* with you?"

I nodded.

"You're keeping her under guard?" asked Fetter.

"No; under the circumstances, we couldn't. We had no authority, you see. A crowd of natives bore her away in triumph."

"Then your work's cut out for you," groaned Fetter. "She's a devil incarnate. Beautiful, irresistible, and evil as corruption itself. If she's back, I'm afraid there's nothing to be done. We've been sitting on a volcano ever since she left. Pressure growing greater every instant, it seemed. She's just what's needed to set it off."

"We'll have to take our chances," I commented. "And now, just what is the set-up?"

"The Worshipers of the Flame, they call themselves. The membership takes in about every male being on Lako. They meet in the great caverns which honeycomb the continent. Ghastly places; I've seen some of the smaller ones. Continent was thrust up from the sea in a molten state, some scientific chap told me once; these caverns were made by great belches of escaping steam or gas. You'll see them.

"She—Liane—and her priests rule solely by terror. The Lakonians are naturally just horses" (a draft animal of ancient Earth, now extinct), "content to work without thinking. Liane and her crew have made them think—just enough to be dangerous. Just what she tells them to think, and no more. Disobedient ones are punished by death. Rather a terrible death, I gather.

"Well, her chief aim is to stop the production of temite. She wishes to bargain with the Council—at her own terms."

"What's her price?" I asked. "What does she want, wealth?"

"No. *Power!*" Fetter leaned for-

ward across the desk, hammering it with both fists to emphasize the word, his eyes gleaming from their deep sockets. "Power, Hanson, that's what she craves. She's insane on the subject. Utterly mad. She lusts after it. You asked her price; it's this: a seat in the Council!"

I GASPED audibly. A seat in the Council! The Council, composed of the wisest heads of the universe, and ruling the universe with absolute authority!

"She *is* mad," I said.

"Crazy," grunted Correy. "Plain crazy. A woman—in the Council!"

Fetter nodded solemnly.

"Mad — crazy — use your own terms," he said. "But that's her price. The Chief didn't tell you that, did he? Well, perhaps he didn't know. I learned it in a very roundabout way. She'll make the formal demand when the time is ripe, never fear. And what's more, unless these Worshippers of the Flame are stamped out—*she'll get what she demands!*"

"Impossible!"

"Not at all. You know what this place is. Only a Lakohian can stand this atmosphere long. No vitality to the light that does come through this damned green stuff they breathe for air; and after a few days, the acid, metallic tang of it drives you frantic. Never can get used to it.

"So the Lakonians have to mine the termite. And the universe must have termite, in quantities that can't be supplied from any other source. If the Lakonians won't mine it—and they don't, when Liane tells them to quit—what will the Council and your Service do about it?"

"Plenty," growled Correy.

"Nothing," contradicted Fetter. "You can kill a man, disintegrate him, imprison him, punish him, as you will, but you can't make him work." And there that phase of the matter rested.

I asked him a number of questions which I felt would help us to start our work properly, and he answered every one of them promptly and fully. Evidently, Fetter had given his problem a great deal of thought, and had done more than a little intelligent investigating of his own.

"If there's anything else I can do to help you," he said as he accompanied us to the door, "don't fail to call upon me. And remember what I said: trust no one except yourselves. Study each move before you make it. These Lakonians are dull-witted, but they'll do whatever Liane tells them. And she thinks fast and cunningly!"

WE thanked him for his warning, and hurried back to the ship through the sickly-green Lakonian dusk. The acrid odor of the atmosphere was already beginning to be disagreeable.

"Decent sort of a chap, Fetter," commented Correy. "All wrought up, isn't he? Worried stiff."

"I imagine he has cause to be. And —he might have been right in saying we should have held Liane; perhaps we could have treated with her in some way."

"No chance! Not that lady. When we treat with her, we'll have to have the whip hand, utterly and completely."

The heavy outer door of the *Ertak's* exit was open, but the transparent inner door, provided for just such an emergency, was in place, forming, in conjunction with a second door, an efficient air-lock. The guard saw us coming and, as we came up, had the inner door smartly opened, standing at salute as we entered. We returned his salute and went up to the navigating room, where I proposed to hold a brief council of war, informing Kincaide and Hendricks of what we had learned from Fetter, and deciding upon a course of action for the following day. Kincaide, whom I had left on watch, was there waiting.

"Well, sir, how do things stack up?" he asked anxiously.

"Not so good. Please ask Mr. Hendricks to report here at once, and I'll give you the whole story."

Kincaide pressed the attention signal to Hendricks' room, and waited impatiently for a response. There was none.

"Try my room," suggested Correy. "Maybe he hasn't moved back to his own quarters yet."

"That's what he said he would be doing," replied Kincaide. But that signal too failed to bring any response.

CORREY glanced at me, a queer, hurt expression in his eyes.

"Shall I go forward and see if he—if he's ill?" he asked quickly.

"Please do," I said, and as soon as he was gone I turned to the microphone and called the sentry on duty at the exit.

"Commander Hanson speaking. Has Mr. Hendricks left the ship?"

"Yes, sir. Some time ago. The lady came back, saying she had word from you; she and Mr. Hendricks left a few minutes later. That was all right, sir?"

"Yes," I said, barely able to force the word from between my lips. Hendricks . . . and Liane? Hendricks . . . a traitor? I cut the microphone and glanced at Kincaide. He must have read the facts in my eyes.

"He's . . . gone, sir?"

"With Liane," I nodded.

The door burst open, and Correy came raging into the room.

"He's not there, sir!" he snapped. "But in his room I found this!"

He held out an envelope, addressed to me. I ripped it open, glanced through the hasty, nervous scrawl, and then read it aloud:

"Sir:

I am leaving with Liane. I am sorry. It had to be.

Hendricks."

"That, gentlemen," I said hoarsely, after a long silence, "will make the blackest entry ever spread upon the log of the *Erak*—upon any ship of the Service. Let us dismiss this thing from our minds, and proceed."

But that was easier, by far, to propose than to accomplish.

IT was late indeed when we finished our deliberations, but the plan decided upon was exceedingly simple.

We would simply enforce our authority until we located definite resistance; we would then concentrate our efforts upon isolating the source of this resistance and overcoming it. That we would find Liane at the bottom of our difficulties, we knew perfectly well, but we desired to place her in a definite position as an enemy. So far, we had nothing against her, no proof of her activities, save the rather guarded report of the Chief, and the evidence given us by Fetter.

There were three major continents on Lakos, but only one of them was inhabited or habitable, the other two being within the large northern polar cap. The activities of The Worshipers of the Flame were centered about the chief city of Gio, Fetter had told us, and therefore we were in position to start action without delay.

Force of men would avail us nothing, since the entire crew of the *Erak* would be but a pitiful force compared to the horde Liane could muster. Our mission could be accomplished—if, indeed, it could be accomplished at all—by the force of whatever authority our position commanded, and the outwitting of Liane.

Accordingly, it was decided that, in the emergency, all three of us would undertake the task, leaving the ship in charge of Sub-officer Scholey, chief of the operating room crew, and a very capable, level-headed man. I gave him his final instructions as we left the ship, early the next morning:

"Scholey, we are leaving you in a position of unusual responsibility. An emergency makes it necessary, or at least desirable, for Mr. Correy, Mr. Kincaide and myself to leave the ship. Mr. Hendricks has already departed; therefore, the *Ertak* will be left in your charge.

"Remain here for five days; if we do not return in that time, leave for Base, and report the circumstances there. The log will reveal full authority for your actions."

"Very well, sir!" He saluted, and we passed through the air-lock which protected the *Ertak* from the unpleasant atmosphere of Lakor, armed only with atomic pistols, and carrying condensed rations and menores at our belts.

WE went directly to the largest of the mines, the natives regarding us with furtive, unfriendly eyes. A great crowd of men were lounging around the mouth of the mine, and as we approached, they tightened their ranks, as though to block our passage.

"We'll bluff it through," I whispered. "They know the uniform of the Service, and they have no leader."

"I'd like to take a swing at one of them," growled Correy. "I don't like their looks—not a bit. But just as you say, sir."

Our bluff worked. We marched up to the packed mass as though we had not even noticed them, and slowly and unwillingly, they opened a path for us, closing in behind us with rather uncomfortable celerity. For a moment I regretted we had not taken a landing crew from the *Ertak*.

However, we won through the mouth of the mine without violence but here a huge Lakonian who seemed to be in authority held up his hand and blocked our way.

"Let me handle him, sir," said Correy from the corner of his mouth. "I understand a little of their language."

"Right," I nodded. "Make it strong!"

Correy stepped forward, his head thrust out truculently, thumbs hooked through his belt, his right hand suggestively near his automatic pistol. He rapped out something in unpleasant gutturals, and the tall Lakonian replied volubly.

"He says it's orders," commented Correy over his shoulder. "Now I'll tell him who's giving orders around here!"

He stepped closer to the Lakonian, and spoke with emphatic briefness. The Lakonian fell back a step, hesitated, and started to reply. Correy stopped him with a single word, and motioned us to follow him. The guard watched us doubtfully, and angrily, but he let us pass.

"He told me," explained Correy, "that *she* had given orders. Didn't name her, but we can guess, all right. I told him that if she wished to say anything to us, she could do it in person; that we weren't afraid of her, of him, or all the Lakonians who ever breathed green soup and called it air. He's a simple soul, and easily impressed. So we got by."

"Nice work," I commended him. "It's an auspicious start, anyway."

THE mouth of the mine was not the usual vertical shaft; as Petters had told us, it was a great ramp, of less than forty-five degrees, leading underground, illuminated by jets of greenish flame from metal brackets set into the wall at regular intervals, and fed by a never-failing interplay of natural gas. The passageway was of varying height and width, but nowhere less than three times my height from floor to ceiling, and it was broad enough at its narrowest so that ten men might have marched easily abreast.

The floor, apparently, had been smoothed by human effort, but for the rest, the corridor was, to judge from the evidence, entirely natural,

for the walls of shiny black rock bore no marks of tools.

At intervals, other passages branched off from the main one we were following, at greater and less angles, but these were much narrower, and had very apparently been hewn in the solid rock. Like the central passage, they were utterly deserted.

"We'll be coming out on the other side, pretty soon," commented Correy after a steady descent of perhaps twenty minutes. "This tunnel must go all the way through. I—what's that?"

We paused and listened. From behind us came a soft, whispering sound, the nature of which we could not determine.

"Sounds like the shuffle of many feet, far behind," suggested Kincaide gravely.

"Or, more likely, the air rushing around the corners of those smaller passages," I suggested. "This is a drafty hole. Or it may be just the combined flarings of all these jets of flame."

"Maybe you're right, sir," nodded Correy. "Anyway, we won't worry about it until we have to. I guess we just keep on going?"

"That seems to be about all there is to do; we should enter one of the big subterranean chambers Fetters mentioned, before long."

AS a matter of fact, it was but a minute or two later, that we turned a curve in the corridor and found ourselves looking into a vast open space, the roof supported by huge pillars of black stone, and the floor littered with rocky debris and mining tools thrown down by workmen.

"This is where they take out the termite ore, I imagine," said Kincaide, picking up a loose fragment of rock. He pointed to a smudge of soft, crumbly gray metal, greasy in appearance, showing on the surface of the specimen he had picked up. "That's the stuff, sir, that's causing us all this trouble: nearly pure metallic termite." He dropped the fragment, looking about curiously. "But where," he added, "are the miners?"

"I'm inclined to believe we'll find out before we get back to the *Ertak*," said Correy grimly. "Everything's moved along too sweetly; trouble's just piling up somewhere."

"That remains to be seen," I commented. "Let's move on, and see what's beyond. That looks like a door of some sort, on the far side. Perhaps it will lead us to something more interesting."

"I hope it does," growled Correy. "This underground business is getting on my nerves!"

It was a door I had seen, a huge slab of light yellow-green metal. I paused, my hand on the simple latch.

"Stand to one side," I said softly. "Let's see what happens."

I lifted the latch, and the heavy door opened inward. Cautiously, I stared through the portal. Inside was blackness and silence; somewhere, in the far distance, I could see two or three tiny pin-pricks of green light.

"We'll take a look around, anyway," I said. "Follow me carefully and be ready for action. It seems all right, but somehow, I don't like the looks of things."

In single file, we passed beyond the massive door, the light from the large room outside streaming ahead of us, our shadows long and grotesque, moving on the rocky floor ahead of us.

Then, suddenly, I became aware that the path of light ahead of us was narrowing. I turned swiftly; the door must be closing!

As I turned, lights reared up all around us, intense light which struck at our eyes with almost tangible force. A great shout rose, echoing, to a vaulted ceiling. Before we could move or cry out, a score of men on either side had pinioned us.

"Damnation!" roared Correy. "If I only had the use of my fists—just for a second!"

WE were in a great cavern, the largest I have ever beheld. A huge bubble, blown in the molten rock by powerful gases from the seething interior of the world.

The roof was invisible above our heads, and the floor sloped down gently in every direction, toward a central dais, so far away that its details were lost to us. From the center of the dais a mighty pillar of green flame mounted into the air nearly twenty times the height of a man. All around the dais, seated on the sloping floor of the cavern, were Lakonians.

There were hundreds of them, thousands of them, and they were as silent and motionless as death. They paid no heed to us; they crouched, each in his place, and stared at the column of greenish flame.

"It was a trap," muttered Kincaide as our captors marched us rapidly toward the dais in the center of the huge amphitheater. "They were waiting for us; I imagine we have been watched all the time. And we walked into the trap exactly like a bunch of schoolboys."

"True—but we've found, I believe, what we wished to find," I told him. "This is the meeting place of the Worshipers of the Flame. There, I imagine is the Flame itself. And unless I'm badly mistaken, that's Liane waiting up there in the center!"

It was Liane. She was seated on a massive, simple throne of the greenish-yellow metal, the column of fire rising directly behind her like an impossible plume. In a semicircle at her feet, in massive chairs made of the odd metal, were perhaps twenty old men, their heads crowned with great, unkempt manes of white hair.

And standing beside Liane's throne, at her right hand, was—*Ffendrick!*

HIS shoulders drooped, his chin rested upon his breast. He was wearing, not the blue-and-silver uniform of the Service, but a simple tunic of pale green, with baskins of dark green leather, laced with black. He did not look up as we were ushered before this impressive group, but Liane watched us with smiling interest.

Liane, seated there upon her throne, was not the Liane of those days in the *Errak*. There, she had been scarcely more than a peculiarly fascinating young woman with a regal bearing and commanding eyes. Here, she was a goddess, terrifyingly beautiful, smiling with her lips, yet holding the power of death in the white hands which hung gracefully from the massive arms of the throne.

She wore a simple garment of thin, shimmering stuff, diaphanous as finest silk. It was black, caught at one shoulder with a flashing green stone. The other shoulder was bared, and the black garment was a perfect foil for the whiteness of her perfect skin, her amazing blue eyes, and the pale gold of her hair.

She lifted one hand in a slight gesture as our conductors passed before the dais; they fell away and formed a close cordon behind us.

"We have awaited your coming," she said in her sibilant voice. "And you are here."

"We are here," I said sternly, "representing, through our Service, the Supreme Council of the universe. What word shall we take back to those who sent us?"

Liane smiled, a slow, cruel smile. The pink fingers of one hand tapped gently on the carven arm of her throne. The eyes of the semicircle of old men watched us with unwavering hatred.

"The word you carry will be a good word," she said slowly. "Liane has decided to be gracious—and yet it is well that you have full understanding of Liane's power. For while the

word Liane shall give you to bear back is a good word, still, Liane is but a woman, and women have been known to change their minds. Is that not so, Commander Hanson?"

"That is so, Liane," I nodded. "And we are glad to hear that your wisdom has led you to be gracious."

She leaned forward suddenly, her eyes flashing with anger.

"Mark you, it is not wisdom but a whim of mine which causes me to be graciously minded!" she cried. "Think you that Liane is afraid? Look about you!"

WE turned slowly and cast our eyes about that great gathering. As far as the eye could reach, in every direction, was a sea of faces. And as we looked, the door through which we had entered this great hall was flung open, and a crowd of tiny specks came surging in.

"And still they come, at Liane's command," she laughed. "They are those who played, to disarm your suspicions, at blocking your entry to this place. They did but follow you, a safe distance behind."

"I thought so," murmured Correy. "Things were going too smoothly. That was what we heard, sir."

I nodded, and looked up at Liane.

"You have many followers," I said. "Yet this is but a small world, and behind the Council are all the worlds of the universe."

Liane threw back her head and laughed, a soft, tinkling sound that rose clearly above the hollow roar of the mighty flame behind her throne.

"You speak bravely," she said, "knowing that Liane holds the upper hand. Did your Council take armed action against us, we would blow up these caverns which are the source of your precious termite, and bury it so deeply no force that could live here could extract it in the quantities in which the universe needs it."

"But enough of this exchange of sharp words. Liane has already said that she is disposed to be gracious. Does that not content you?"

"I will bear back to those who sent me whatever word you have to offer; it is not for me to judge its graciousness," I said coolly.

"Then—but first, let me show you how well I rule here," she said. She spoke to one of the old men seated at her feet; he arose and disappeared in a passage leading from directly beneath the dais.

"You will see, presently, the punishment of Liane," she said smilingly. "Liane, Chief Priestess of the Flame, Mother of Life, Giver of Death, Most Worshiped of the Worshipers.

"Perhaps you wonder how it came that Liane sits here in judgment upon a whole people? Let me tell you, while we await the execution of Liane's judgment.

"The father of Liane, and his father before him, back into those remote days of which we have no knowledge, were Chief Priests of the Worshipers of the Flame. But they were lacking in ambition, in knowledge, and in power. Their followers were but few, and their hands were held out in benediction and not in command.

"But the father of Liane had no son; instead he had a daughter, in whom was all the wisdom of those who had been the Chief Priests. She gathered about her a group of old men, shrewd and cunning, the lesser priests and those who would know the feel of power, who were not priests. You see them here at the feet of Liane.

"And under Liane's guidance, the ranks of the Worshipers grew, and as this power grew, so grew the power of Liane, until the time came when no man, no woman, on the face of Lakor, dared question the command of the Chief Priestess. And those who would have rebelled, were made to feel the power of Liane—as these you see here now."

THE old man had reappeared, and behind him were two miserable wretches, closely guarded by a dozen armed men. Liane spoke briefly to the old man, and then turned to us.

"The first of these is one who has dared to disobey," she explained. "He brought out more of the ore than Liane had ordered. Do you hear the multitude? They know already what his fate will be."

A long, shuddering whisper had arisen from the thousands of beings crouched there in the amphitheater, as the uncouth figure of the prisoner was led up a flight of steep, narrow steps to the very base of the flame.

Hendricks, still hiding his face from us, beat over Liane and whispered something in her ear; she caressed his arm softly, and shook her head. Hendricks leaned more heavily against the throne, shuddering.

Slowly, the flame was dying, until we could see that it was not a solid pillar of fire, but a hollow circle of flame, fed by innumerable jets set at the base of a circle of trifle more than the length of a man across.

Into those deadly circles the condemned man was led. His legs were bound swiftly, so that he could not move, and the old man stepped back quickly.

As though his movement had been a signal, the flames shot up with a roar, until they lost themselves far over our heads. As one man, the three of us started forward, but the guards hemmed us in instantly.

"Fools!" cried Liane. "Be still! The power of Liane is absolute here."

We stared, fascinated, at the terrible sight. The flame spouted, streaks of blue and yellow streaking up from its base. Mercifully, we could not see within that encircling wall of fire.

SLOWLY, the flame died down again. A trap-door opened in the circle, and some formless thing dropped out of sight. Liane questioned the old man again, her eyes resting upon the other prisoner. The old man answered briefly.

"This one spoke against the power of Liane," she explained smilingly. "He said Liane was cruel; that she was selfish. He also must feel the embrace of the sacred Flame."

I heard, rather than saw, the ghastly drama repeated, for I had beat my head, and would not look up. Liane was no woman; she was a fiend. And yet for her a trusted officer, a friend, had forsworn his service and his comrades. I wondered, as I stood there with bowed head, what were the thoughts which must have been passing through Hendricks' mind.

"You fear to look upon the punishment of Liane?" the voice of the unholy priestess broke in upon my shuddering reverie. "Then you understand why her power is absolute; why she is Mother of Life, and Giver of Death, throughout all Lakor. And now for the word I promised you, a gracious word from one who could be terrible and not gracious, were that her whim.

"It has been in the mind of Liane to extend her power, to make for herself a place in this Supreme Council of which you speak with so much awe and reverence, Commander Hanson. But, by happenchance, another whim has seized her."

LIANE looked up at Hendricks, smilingly, and took one of his hands in hers. It was wonderful how her face softened as he returned, fiercely, the pressure of her soft hands.

"I know it will sound strange to your ears," she said in a voice almost tender, "but Liane is, after all, a woman, with many, if not all, a woman's many weaknesses. And while even in his presence Liane will say that her lover was at the beginning looked upon as no more than a tool which might further Liane's power, he has won now a place in her heart."

I saw Hendricks tremble as she admitted her love, and that portion of his face which we could see flushed hotly.

"And so, Lizne has elected to give up, at least for the present, the place in the Council which she could command. For after all, that would be a remote power, lacking in the elements of physical power which Lizne has over these, her people, and in which she has learned to delight.

"So, Commander Hanson, bear to your superiors this word: Lizne will permit a production of whatever reasonable amount of tenite is desired. She will remain here with her consort, brooking no interference, no changes, no commands from any person or organization. Go, now, and take with you the words of Lizne!"

I looked up at her gravely, and shook my head.

"We shall go," I said, "and we shall take with us your words. But I warn you that the words you have spoken are treason to the universe, in that you have defied the Council!"

Lizne leaped from her throne, her scarlet lips drawn back against her white and gleaming teeth. Her eyes, dilated with anger, blazed down upon us almost as hotly as the flame which rose behind her.

"Go! And quickly!" she fairly screamed. "If you have no desire to feel the embrace of the sacred Flame, then go!"

I bowed silently, and motioned to Correy and Kincaide. Swiftly, we made our way down a long aisle, surrounded by motionless figures staring unwinkingly at the column of fire, toward the door by which we had entered this great chamber.

Behind us, I could hear Lizne's clear voice lifted in her own guttural language, as she addressed the multitude.

SAFELY within the *Ertak*, we discussed the morning's adventure over a late luncheon.

"I suppose," said Kincaide, "there's nothing left to do but tell Fetter as much as seems wise, to reassure him, and then return to Base to make our report."

"We'll come back, if we do," growled Correy. "And we'll come back to fight. The Council won't stand for her attitude."

"Undoubtedly that's true," I admitted. "Still, I believe we should put it up to Base, and through Base to the Council, before doing anything more. Much, if not all, of what she said was perfectly true."

"It was that," nodded Kincaide. "There were scores, if not hundreds of doors leading into that big chamber; I imagine it can be reached, underground, from any point on the continent. And those winding passages would be simple to defend from any form of invasion."

"But could these Lakoolans fight?" asked Correy. "That's what I'd like to know. I doubt it. They look like a sleepy, ignorant lot."

"I think they'd fight, to the death, if Lizne ordered them to," I replied thoughtfully. "Did you notice the way they stared at the flame, never moving, never even winking? My idea is that it exercises a sort of auto-hypnotic influence over them, which gives Lizne just the right opportunity to impress her will upon them."

"I wondered about that," Kincaide commented. "I believe you're right, sir. Any idea as to when we'll shove off?"

"There's no particular hurry; Fetter will be busy until evening, I imagine, so we won't bother him until then. As soon as we've had a chat with him, we can start."

"And without Hendricks," said Kincaide, shaking his head sadly. "I wonder—"

"If you don't mind, Mr. Kincaide, we won't mention his name on the *Ertak* after this," I interrupted. "I, for one, would rather forget him. Wouldn't you?"

"I would, sir, if I could," said Kincaide softly. "But that's not easy, is it?"

It wasn't easy. As a matter of fact, it was impossible. I knew I would never forget my picture of him, standing there shaken and miserable, beside the woman for whom he had disgraced his uniform, hiding his head in shame from the eyes of the men he had called comrades, and who had called him friend. But to talk of him was morbid.

IT was late in the afternoon when I called Correy and Kincaide to the navigating room, where I had spent several hours charting our return course.

"I believe, gentlemen," I remarked, "that we can call on Mr. Fetter now. I'll ask you to remain in charge of the ship, Mr. Kincaide, while Mr. Correy and I—"

An attention signal sounded sharply to interrupt me. I answered it instantly.

"Sentry at exit, sir," said an excited voice. "Mr. Hendricks and the woman stowaway are here asking for you. They say it is very urgent."

"Bring them both here at once, under guard," I ordered. "Be sure you are properly relieved."

"Right, sir!"

I turned to Correy and Kincaide, who were watching me with curious eyes. My excitement must have shown upon my face.

"Mr. Hendricks and Liane are at the exit, asking to see me," I snapped. "They'll be here in a moment. What do you suppose is in the air?"

"Hendricks?" muttered Correy, his face darkening. "It seems to me he has a lot of nerve to—"

There was a sharp tap on the door.

"Come!" I ordered quickly. The door opened and Liane, followed by Hendricks, hurried into the room.

"That will do," I nodded to the guard who had accompanied them. "You may go."

"You wonder why we're here, I suppose?" demanded Liane. "I'll tell you, quickly, for every instant is precious."

This was a very different Liane. She was no longer clad in diaphanous black; she was wearing a tunic similar to the one she had worn on board the *Ertak*, save that this one was torn and soiled. Her lips, as she talked, twitched with an insane anger; her amazing eyes were like those of a cornered beast of the wilderness.

"My council of wise old men turned against me when I told them my plans to marry the man of my choice. They said he was an outsider, an enemy, a foreigner. They would have none of him. They demanded that I give him to the Flame, and marry one of my own kind. They had not, of course, understood what I had said to you there in the great chapel of the Flame.

"I defied them. We escaped through a passage which is not known to any save myself, and the existence of which my father taught me years ago. We are here, but they will guess where we have gone. My old men are exciting my people against me—and for that shall all, down to the last one, know the embrace of the Flame!" She gritted her teeth on the words, her nostrils distended with rage.

"I—I am safe. I can command them; I can make them know my power, and I shall. The Flame will have much to feed upon in the days which are to come, I promise you. But my beloved would not be safe; at this moment I cannot protect him. So I have brought him back. I—I know he . . . but I will not be weak. I am Liane!"

SHE faced Hendricks, who had stood there like a graven image, watching her. Her arms went about his neck; her lips sought his.

"My beloved!" she whispered. "Liane was but a woman, after all.

Darling! Good-by!" She kissed him again, and hurried to the door.

"One more thing!" she cried. "I must master them myself. I must show them I—I, Liane—am ruler here. You promise? You promise me you will not interfere; that you will do nothing?"

"But—"

Liane interrupted me before I could put my objections into words.

"Promise!" she commanded. "There are hundreds, thousands of them! You cannot slay them all—and if you did, there would be more. I can bend them to my will: they know my power. Promise, or there will be many deaths upon your hands!"

"I promise," I said.

"And you—all of you?" she demanded, sweeping Correy and Kincaide with her eyes.

"Commander Hanson speaks for us all," nodded Kincaide.

With a last glance at Hendricks, whose eyes had never left her for an instant, she was gone.

Hendricks uttered a long, quivering sigh. His face, as he turned to us, was ghastly white.

"She's gone," he muttered. "Forever."

"That's exceedingly unfortunate, sir, for you," I replied crisply. "As soon as it's perfectly safe, we'll see to it that you depart also."

The sting of my words apparently did not touch him.

"You don't understand," he said dully. "I know what you think, and I do not blame you. She came back; you know that.

"'You are coming with me,' she said. 'I care for you. I want you. You are coming with me, at once.' I told her I was not; that I loved her, but that I could not, would not, go.

"She opened a port and showed me one of her countrymen, standing not far away, watching the ship. He held something in his hand.

"'He has one of your hand bombs,' she told me. 'I found it while I was hidden, and took it with me when I left. If you do not come with me, he will throw it against the ship, destroy it, and those within it.'

"There was nothing else for me to do. She permitted me to explain no more than I did in the note I left. I pleaded with her; did all I could. Finally I persuaded her to give you the word she did, there before the great flame.

"She brought me back here at the risk of her own life, and, what is even more precious to her, her power. In—in her own way, she loves me. . . ."

IT was an amazing story: a second or two passed before any of us could speak. And then words came, fast and joyous; our friend, our trusted fellow-officer had come back to us! I felt as though a great black cloud had slid from across the sun.

And then, above our voices, rose a great matter of sound. We glanced at one another, wonderingly. Hendricks was the first to make a move.

"That's the mob!" he said, darting toward the door. We followed him swiftly to the exit of the ship, through the air-lock, out into the open.

Hendricks had spoken the truth. Liane was walking, very slowly and deliberately, her head flung back proudly, toward the city. Coming toward her, like a great ragged wave, was a mighty mass of humanity, led by capering old men—undoubtedly the lesser priests, who had turned against her.

"The portable projectors, sir!" begged Correy excitedly. "A pair of them, and that mob—"

"We're bound by our promise," I reminded him. "She's not afraid; her power is terrible. I believe she'll win without them. Look!"

Liane had paused. She lifted one hand in a gesture of command, and called out to the rabble. Correy translated the whole thing for me later.

"Halt!" she cried sharply. "Who

moves upon the Chief Priestess of the Flame earns the embrace of the Flame!"

The crowd halted, cowering; then the old man shouted to them and gestured them onward. With a rush, the front ranks came on.

"So!" Liane called out to them. "You would disobey Liane? Yet even yet it is not too late; Liane gives you one chance more. You little know the Chief Priestess of the Flame if you think she will tolerate an encroachment of her power. Back! Back, I say, or you all shall feel the might of Liane!"

Before her tirade the mob faltered, but again the crazed old men led them on.

Liane turned, saw us, and made a regal gesture of farewell. From the bosom of her tunic she snatched a small black object, and swung it high above her head.

"The bomb!" shouted Hendricks. "She has it; she—"

At the very feet of the onrushing crowd the black object struck. There was a hollow roar; a blast of thundering air swept us backward to the ground.

When we scrambled to our feet, Liane was gone. The relentless mob had gone. Where they had been was a great crater of raw earth, strewn with ghastly fragments. Far back toward the city a few straggling figures ran frantically away from that scene of death.

"Gone!" I said. "Power was a mania, an obsession with her. Even her death was a supreme gesture—of power, of authority."

"Liane," Hendricks whispered. "Chief Priestess of the Flame. . . . Giver of Death. . . ."

WITH Liane gone, and with her the old men who had tried to snatch her power from her hand, and who might have caused us trouble, the rebellion of the Lakonians was at an end.

Leaderless, they were helpless, and I believe they were happy in the change. Sometimes the old ways are better than the new, and Liane's régime had been merciless and rather terrible.

There are many kinds of women: great women, and women with small souls; women filled with the spirit of sacrifice; selfish women, good women and bad.

And Liane? I leave her for you to judge. She was a woman; classify her for yourself.

After all, I am an old man, and perhaps I have forgotten the ways of women. I do not wish to judge, on one hand to be called bitter and hard, on the other hand to be condemned as soft with advancing age.

I have given you the story of Liane, Chief Priestess of the Flame.

How, you clever and infallible members of this present generation, do you judge her?

IN THE NEXT ISSUE

Raiders of the Universes
By Donald Wandrei

Slaves of Mercury
By Nat Schachner

—And Others!

The Marvelous Termites

Dear Editor:

Perhaps the most fantastic thing about my termite story is that the bulk of it is not fantastic at all. It's truth, as far as we know it.

Only two major parts of the story are imaginative—the reduction in size of the men involved, and the nature of the termite ruler. That last, for all we know, may be truth, too: the termites, being able to control biological processes to an astounding degree, may have found a way to hatch rulers that run to brain at the expense of body.

That biological control, by the way, is perhaps the most mysterious of termite faculties. Man, lord of creation, cannot predetermine the sex of his unborn, yet the termite, a lowly insect, can hatch at will a dozen different forms of life from eggs that appear microscopically identical. Furthermore, these varying forms are often so distinctly different from each other as to appear to belong to entirely different species.

There actually are "worker" termites condemned for life to hang head down, with abdomens enormously distended to act as storage "vats" into which any passing termite may dip at will. There are "soldiers" with syringe heads, in which is secreted a sticky acid that may be projected for several centimeters to drench and bind an enemy. There are other soldiers with "bump" heads, cultivated for the purpose of corking up breaches in the termitary wall till the workers can repair them with their marvelous masonry; and yet other soldiers—the most common type—with mandibles so huge that they cannot feed themselves, but must be mouth-fed by the workers.

Thus the termites select their citizenry: a giant "queen," as big as a small mouse; gigantic soldiers of half a dozen highly specialized types; smaller soldiers that serve precisely in the capacity of our police, and regulate traffic in the mound; workers who form the bulk of the population and live and die for labor's sake alone. And all these widely different forms, I repeat, come from the same common stock of eggs. How do they do it?

There are other mysteries. How do they manage to keep the air in the mounds moist during a six-month stretch of utter aridity in a desert place? How can they hold interior temperature up to ninety-five, when the thermometer outside registers eighty? Above all, what brain force rules them? What power determines which eggs shall hatch which forms, controls

temperatures, regulates humidity and directs building operations? The things are blind, remember; yet, sightless as they are, and building from the inside out instead of from the outside in, they manage to follow a certain symmetry of design.

Our knowledge of the dark ways of the termite organization is as yet scanty. Nevertheless, study of the existing data on the subject is a fascinating one. I recommend a good book on termites—say, Maeterlinck's "Life of the White Ant"—as being more interesting than most works of the imagination.—Paul Ernst.

"What a Man!"

Dear Editor:

Here I am again, but I just had to write and tell you how the cover of "our" Astounding Stories gripped me. I actually seemed to feel myself dangling in mid-air while that ape held my ankle in his terrible hold.

Wesso (what a man!) has always been great, but "The Mind Master" cover was a superb one indeed.

Paul is also good, but I do not care for his figures or heads of humans. Maybe we'll look that way, but I hope not.

Hope I didn't intrude. I'd be pleased to correspond with anyone interested.—Marianne Ferguson, 20 So. Buffum St., Worcester, Mass.

In Good Company

Dear Editor:

I have been a reader of Astounding Stories for almost a year, and think our mag the best in the field. I like best the John Hanson stories and "The Readers' Corner."

The most outstanding stories you have published are: "The Exile of Time" and "Giants on the Earth." Although I know time-traveling stories are impossible, I enjoy them very much and that is what I buy the magazine for, enjoyment.

The only type of stories needed in "our" magazine are medical. Please give us some.

To tell you what I think about Astounding Stories, it is one of the three magazines I read regularly and thoroughly. The other two are "The Literary Digest" and "The National Geographic Magazine."—C. D. Gonzales, 7039 Freret St., New Orleans, La.

The Slam of the Month

Dear Editor:

I'm sorry, but this is going to be no love letter, but rather a criticism for the lack of fine qualities in Astounding Stories.

The art work and general appearance of the mag is exceptionally poor. Your artists are rotten—Wesso included. His covers for March, 1932, and February, 1931, were the worst I have ever seen on any Science Fiction magazine, and I read them all. Wesso's drawings show future men with trousers like tights always, and space ships with impossible glass domes. His covers, however, are, on the whole, quite good [?—Ed.]. I don't believe I have ever made out the details of any of his interior illustrations yet, but as I've spied Paul's inimitable work in the later issues, I can hope for something better.

Your stories are merely the blood and thunder type of a few years back in a new setting. You certainly have some good authors, but all their plots are old. Science Fiction has been alive for some years now, and there is little new in science to be found, while your authors have just about exhausted the supply of prehistoric animals and monstrosities in their interplanetary tales. It is obvious that the eternal plot of a hero, a dirty villain and a girl will no longer suffice. No longer can you make the tale of world wars and invasions interesting without their having human and character interest. The plots of even Ray Cummings are childish. Analyzing the plot of that absurd fairy tale, "Beyond the Vanishing Point," I find a warped genius who has been jilted and resolves to take his love by force. He takes her onto the atom with him (how, I am sure neither I nor Ray Cummings know); the heroes follow; a fight and the villainous dwarf is killed. Oh, Mr. Editor, how astounding, and oh, how novel!

This is no reflection on the works of Ray Cummings, who is one of my favorite authors and whose "Brigands of the Moon" I enjoyed immensely.

Many perhaps will wonder why I read Astounding Stories, and why I bother to write in. The truth is that some day I hope to be able to hold A. S. up beside the best S. F. magazines and say, "Another of them!"

But there is a little statement on your mag's title page, that I can't quite believe: "The Clayton Standard on a magazine guarantees that the stories therein are clean, interesting, vivid, by leading writers of the day. . . ."

Is it really true, Mr. Editor?

I am sure there will be some censored letters in A. S. over these opinions of mine, but should anyone care to write to me personally, I shall discuss the subject with him. Perhaps if Paul's drawings increase in number and the stories of Ernst, Keck and Hal Wells increase likewise, I shall be forced to apologize.—C. E. Morrison, 9 Hanby St., Brighton Beach, Melbourne, Victoria, Australia.

Thanks, Old Pal

Dear Editor:

You are now hearing from a new country fan. I have been reading A. S. for over six months, and I think they're O. K. The stories I like to read best are about traveling in space in rocket ships, John Hanson's adventures and Dr. Bird's exploits.

I don't care so much about traveling in time. Why? Because if a guy took his girl for a ride in the past he might be embarrassed by witnessing the scene of one of his ancestors being hung for stealing horses.

Another thing Ed, old pal, you ought to publish A. S. twice a month because, pro while, your stories are swell and all too hate to wait a whole month for another A. S.

I would like to correspond with the readers of A. S.—Clarence Guenther, 976 W. Central Ave., St. Paul, Minn.

Haywire History

Dear Editor:

I've read so many readers' explanations and opinions on how time-traveling can or cannot be accomplished, that I finally feel that I must offer my say-so on why the idea is absurd.

Supposing a man should invent a Tt machine and he set it for 4,000 years B. C. In the first place, where would the stage be placed for the events that he might take part in? In the second place, assume that the time-traveler finds it possible to enter an ancient city where the inhabitants prove hostile and he pulls out a pistol and shoots the reigning king dead—how is all this going to look in the history of Time? "———, 17th King of the City of ——— born 4000 B. C., died 3949 B. C., killed by a pistol discharged by ———, who lived in 1931 A. D." Or, what is even more ridiculous "———, born 1879 A. D., died 4000 B. C., killed by the inhabitants of the city of ———"

I would appreciate other readers' opinions and explanations on this subject. I am always greatly entertained by A. S. It is certainly the best Science Fiction magazine on the newsstand.—William Astbury, 5852 N. Lincoln St., Chicago, Ill.

Defending "We Ruralites"

Dear Editor:

About two years ago I bought my first copy of Astounding Stories, and since that memorable day I have been a most enthusiastic if inconstant reader. I have always read the "Corner," but do not read it first. I begin at the front cover of the magazine and read through to the back cover, reading everything in the order in which it comes—advertisements and all.

I have read about a dozen copies of A. S. and have yet to see a letter written by a person with a rural address. Fearing that the city dwellers may be laboring under the impression that we ruralites lack interest in both science and Science Fiction, I have resolved to make an effort to correct that impression—if it really does exist.

I am deeply interested in anything scientific, especially physics, psychology, astronomy and anything pertaining to the nature of space, time, light and matter. The height, breadth and depth of my ambitions is this: to increase my knowledge on those subjects about one hundred-fold; to select the one or ones that appeal to me most strongly; to delve deeper and deeper in the field of science that I select as my life work; and, finally, to explore new fields, to enter into realms hitherto reopened to human knowledge.

I have no criticism to offer, nor any suggestions as to how A. S. might be made into a better magazine. It suits me just as it is. My favorite authors are Captain S. P. Meek, Charles Willard Diffin, R. F. Starzl, Arthur J. Burks, Earl Vincent and Ray Cummings in about the order given. I believe that Francis Flagg could write very interesting stories if he would be more careful in the selection and treatment of his subject matter. His "Seed of the Tee-Tee Birds" held the germs of some very wonderful ideas, but neglected to take into account some well-known scientific facts. If a man of earth weighing, say, one hundred and seventy-five pounds could by any process be made small enough to occupy a planet in an atomic universe, what would become of his weight? If in his reduced size he continued to weigh as much as ever, it is obvious that he could not live on such a planet. He would weigh several thousand million times as much as the planet itself. One can imagine the results of such a situation!—George W. Green, Cowden, Texas.

As Bad as That?

Dear Editor:

Up till now I have been a silent reader of Astounding Stories, but as I always read the comments and criticisms in the "Corner" I would like to add my two cents.

To begin with, I say: cut the pages even, and print the stories on smooth paper and in a larger size.

John, age 15 or 16, is reading a copy of Astounding Stories that a school chum lent him. His mother walks in the room and sees him with a magazine that looks like a dime novel; and she, not wanting her son to read trash, promptly takes it away from him and destroys it in spite of his protests and explanations that it is really good Science Fiction.

"Hello," says Mr. Brown as he walks up to a newsstand and sees his friend Mr. Smith. "Buying the home-town paper, I suppose." "No," says Mr. Smith: "getting my monthly copy of Astounding Stories." "Astounding Stories!" repeats Mr. Brown. "Let me see one." Mr. Smith hands him a copy, and Mr. Brown glances at the cover, thumbs through a few pages and hands it back. With a smile on his face he says to Mr. Smith, "Hm-m, I used to read this kind of fiction when I was a kid. Well, so long. I'll be seeing you later."

With that he walks off, leaving Mr. Smith with a protest on his lips.

Now, don't you think it's a shame for people to get such impressions of a really good magazine?

If there are any boys or girls of high school age that read Astounding Stories, I would like to hear their comments and criticism either through the "Corner" or by corresponding with me. — Warren Gertz, 3111 N. W. 24th St., Oklahoma City, Okla.

Bad Start, Good Finish

Dear Editor:

I went into a magazine store in the Loop to buy a new magazine I was expecting to appear, but when I saw the attractive cover of the February issue of Astounding Stories looking up at me from the top of a two-foot pile I immediately forgot all about the other magazine.

Wesso's cover was great, but his drawings could have been better. I have seen him do much better work. Paul's drawing was very good. I hope he will have more illustrations in "our" magazine in future issues.—Jack Darrow, 4215 N. Spaulding Ave., Chicago, Ill.

Knockers of Knockers Knocked

Dear Editor:

I have just finished reading the February issue, and find it's beyond reproach. The stories were all marvelous, especially "The Pigmy Planet," by Jack Williamson. But I have two questions I would like to ask Mr. Williamson. From the story, I take it that the weights of the characters were always relative to the size of their bodies. How was that made possible? I should think their weight would always be the same even if they were reduced in size. Would any of the potential energy of the gasoline in the airplanes be lost, due to the reducing in size? If not, why wouldn't the airplane engine be destroyed by the power of the gasoline when both were greatly reduced in size?

I often wonder why some of the readers denounce critics of A. S. in the strongest language they dare use. This is rather a foolish attitude to take against one who may be trying to give some constructive criticism, or the one who thinks he is rather clever in calling "our" magazine all the names possible. If a reader makes a criticism in appropriate language and gives proof of his belief, he is just as loyal as the one who blows up in a burst of fury and calls the critic down in no approved language.

The critic who makes nasty remarks about the magazine, binding, and everything in general, and then threatens to quit the magazine, does so because he doesn't know better or else he is having a big laugh out of reading letters from hotheads who call him every name conceivable. If the readers would ignore letters of this type, a great majority of them would drop off. So in the future let us have less letters of the type denouncing critics who are within their rights and those others who should be ignored.—Edward F. Gervais, 312 So. Pennsylvania Ave., Lansing, Mich.

The Meaning of A. S.

Dear Editor:

How about a sequel to "The Red Hell of Jupiter!" In fact, I want a sequel to all your stories, for they're all darn good.

For January the stories were 100 per cent., especially "Giants on the Earth," by Capt. S. P. Meek. He knows how to write. I hope he'll have a sequel ready soon. I hate the idea of waiting a month. Still, it's for the best, for if A. S. came out weekly it wouldn't be so highly praised. I always read the "Corner." It is easy to see that the readers are interested in their magazine, for they are always ready with comments and suggestions.

The first issue of A. S. I read came accidentally. I was looking for something to read one evening, and when I pulled A. S. from the stand I was sore. I had never read one before, so I threw it on the table; but when I finished the stories I was so excited that I didn't wait for the next issue, but traced back all those I missed. This is one mag I'll always hand to my friends. A. S. should stand for "Always satisfies."—Gene DeBlasi, 1009 Washington Ave., Bronx, N. Y.

This and That

Dear Editor:

We do not want a weekly mag, as it would lower the quality of the stories a good deal. Some of the stories that are now rejected by "our" mag would have to be used, and they would be terrible!

When I put a challenge in our Science Fiction mag a few months ago I received a conglomeration and maelstrom of answers. I certainly learned what a number of fellow readers thought about things!

I wish the readers would get a new slang word instead of "brickbat" to throw at bad stories. We wouldn't have to throw any, though, if we could furnish new or revised ideas and theories.

Will the Science Fiction fan who endeavored to get in touch with me a month ago, Abraham Mutchnick by name, write me at my address?

Say, how can an atom be inhabited, if it is the smallest particle of matter? It can't have metal of different kinds. An atom is composed of one element exclusively.—Thos. A. Daniel, Box 247, Sidney, Nebr.

"Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star"

Dear Editor:

I have just finished reading the February issue. Good, clean, interesting stories, all of them, but I especially liked "The Pigmy Planet," by Jack Williamson. I believe he wrote "Wolves of Darkness," which appeared in a recent issue of

Strange Tales. It was a real weird story, a wonderful piece of fiction. Let's have more of his work.

Don't you think a few bits of poetry scattered through the magazine would improve it? You know, variety is the spice of life. Any kind will do. Think it over.—Mark A. Devine, Cincinnati, Ohio.

From a "Silent Reader"

Dear Editor:

I have been a silent Reader of A. S. for two years, and I think it's about time I voiced my opinion of the stories. I liked "Hawk Curse," the first story by Anthony Gilmore I have read. Let's have more stories from his pen. I think, in all the issues of A. S., "The Exile of Time" and "Hawk Curse" were the best stories.

I don't see why people have to be prejudiced against A. S. because of the rough edges. As long as the stories are good and hold the interest of the readers, that's all that matters.

The authors I like best are: Cummings, Gilmore, Williamson, Vincent, Wright and Diffie.—Z. Herbert, 124 Beaver Blvd., San Antonio, Tex.

Likes the Small Size

Dear Editor:

I wish to express my thanks for the way you have been improving "our" mag in the past year. If it never falls below its present standard, it will remain the best Science Fiction magazine on the market.

Is not Edwin K. Sloat a newcomer to the ranks? I do not recollect having read a story by him before. I liked his "The Space Rover."

I am overjoyed to see that we are to have another Hawk Curse story next month. "Hawk Curse" was, in my opinion, one of the best stories you have yet published. "Brood of the Dark Moon" was as good at the finish as it was at the start, and that's saying something.

Do not change the size of your mag, unless to make it thicker. I have a complete set of A. S. bound into volumes, and a change in size would spoil them for binding. Besides, the smaller size is easier to hold.—J. J. Johnston, Mowbray, Manitoba, Can.

Yes, the Story's the Thing

Dear Editor:

After seeing the February issue of A. S., I feel that I should, as a Science Fiction fan, laud the steady improvement of our mag.

Wesso's cover illustration is particularly attractive and well done on this issue, and the stories are generally improved in style and plot with the exception of Edwin K. Sloat's "The Space Rover," which was a trifle weak in scientific detail.

For style and interest, I would rate stories in the February issue like this: first place to H. Q. Wimter for "Seed of the Arctic Ice"—altogether unique and written in mile-a-minute style. Second place jointly to Arthur J. Burks and Ray Cummings. Their "The Mind Master" and "Wanted the Invader" are as good, if not a little better, than their usual fine work. Then "The Pigmy Planet" and "Zebra of Xollar."

What has become of all the harangue for semi-weeklies, semi-annuals, annuals and what have you? Did I hear a last faint chirp about rough edges? Why not publish a facsimile of the "operating expense" bill? Perhaps some of those who have not heard about the depression could glean something from that. I still insist the anatomy of the mag is "oke." The vital thing is the stories.—John Gervais, Box 481, Barre, Ore.

Announcement

Dear Editor:

I read your magazine and find it very interesting.

I am very much interested in space flying and the like, and belong to the Association of Interplanetary Engineers, a group of young men who are greatly interested in interplanetary subjects. This is no organization of boys who just want to say that they belong, but one of young men who are really doing some honest work on this subject.

If there are any young men who are sincerely interested in interplanetary subjects and in such an organization, I should like them to drop me a letter telling me about themselves. Remember, this is only for people who are sincere.—Van Horn Fabricius, 447 Central Ave., Orange, N. J.

Hates Continued Stories

Dear Editor:

In me you have found and lost a reader of your magazine, Astounding Stories. I think the stories are great and enjoy them immensely; they are so different; but I have purchased my last copy. Why? Well, I just won't waste my money on magazines that run continued stories.

I really do want to read Astounding Stories and am very much disappointed. When you realize that continued stories are cutting down circulation and stop running them, please advise me so I can start reading your magazine again.—H. R. O'Brien, Butler, Ill.

[But why don't you save the instalments and read the serial when you have it complete? Many of the best stories come in the long lengths, and therefore have to be cut up for monthly publications.—Ed.]

Announcement

Dear Editor:

So many people living in the Eastern States have written me wanting to join the

Scientifiction Club that I have decided to make it a free-for-all club. It doesn't make any difference where the person lives; everybody is welcome.—Norman Caldwell, 4068 - 18th St., San Francisco, Calif.

Practical Objections

Dear Editor:

Once again I must break in upon your kindly (?) [O. K. Kindly—Ed.] meditations. I was struck by a thought concerning the hull plates on a space ship. A ship in your stories sometimes becomes red-hot on the outside while passing through the atmosphere. But the heat would expand the steel or metal plates to an alarming degree, and this would result in dire consequences! Then the ship passes on into space, into a temperature close to absolute zero, where the plates of metal would contract and pull away from each other. How do we remedy this? [I guess you'll have to ask our authors!—Ed.]

Jack Williamson in "The Pygmy Planet" didn't describe any method of keeping the sphere spinning up in the air. And the evolution that would show on the planet could not take place so fast, since we were told that the planet turned slowly on its axis in front of the hero. The little planet would have to whirl at break-neck speed for the inventor to have watched several races rise and fall in so short a time. The proportion of time on the two worlds is all balance.—Thos. R. Daniel, Box 247, Sidney, Nebr.

Our Problem Solved

Dear Editor:

Well, all I know is what I read in the papers, and what my long ears pick up as they drag along the ground, and least and last is what I read in Astounding Stories.

And incidentally, I see that you gave us a real treat by letting Paul do one of the drawings. Too bad you didn't let Paul do the cover.

It seems that Science Fiction authors think that it is a real job to get windows in a space liner that will withstand the high pressure out in space. I am sure that our very modest inventor of cellophane could give us a composition. [I sometimes think that cellophane could do it as is.—Ed.]

I remain your Ocean Park correspondent who still thinks that when better Science Fiction stories are written Astounding Stories will print them.—Edward Anderson, 123 Hollister, Ocean Park, Cal.

Odbglongh Omigosh!

Dear Editor:

I wish to commend you upon your choice of good, snappy action stories, which are not all given over to scientific dissertations such as are found in other magazines. The stories that you have published in the last two years have been thoroughly satisfactory and I only hope for a continuation of the present policy. Being in the printing business myself, I am aware that it costs plenty of money to print a large edition of books, as well as to use smooth paper, and will only express the hope that you will in due time be able to give us these; and in the meantime we will all continue to enjoy the magazine for its contents, and not crab about expensive mechanical details.

I hope that you may be able to give us in Strange Tales some of Seabury Quinn's inimitable stories. Clark Smith's imagination is wonderful, and his stories unique.

Hrindqpoigmnbah! Zbothaggnah! Iqbal dloth odbglongh! Omigosh! I nearly sprained my neck when I read "The Door to Saturn" aloud to a group of friends.—Grant V. Wallace, 1964 Marin Ave., Berkeley, Cal.

Not So Seriously

Dear Editor:

I think that A. S. is an excellent Science Fiction magazine, and cannot be beat. The one story I liked especially was "The Exile of Time," by Ray Cummings. It is too bad we can't travel into the past and into the future like our friend Cripple Tugh did.

One should not take the stories so seriously. Take them for what they are and enjoy yourself. Why get het up because the stories do not explain a lot of scientific facts, dates, distances, etc? Bear in mind that most of the stories are impossible. Maybe some day some of these things will be possible, but the majority of them will not. Who knows what lies beyond our earth and distant planets? Possibly strange things.

But interplanetary travel may some day exist. At the present it is hard to tell, though scientists are studying and working up theories right along. Possibly one of them will soon hit the right key. Let's hope so. Supposing our scientists do find the way to control gravity and send ships forth into the unknown, will there be any volunteers to test these things out? A person would want proof of the thing before endangering his life on some fool space ship he knew nothing about.

I tried a copy of Strange Tales and found it to be excellent. One story was especially good, "Wolves of Darkness."—Roy Pierce Hunt, Denver, Colo.

Lack Originality?

Dear Editor:

Astounding Stories improves every issue! Wente certainly knows how to catch the eye of the public.

I have just finished reading the February number, and nothing has ever held me more in suspense than the first installment of "Wandl, the Invader."

"The Mind Master" was a great sequel to "Masque the Mighty." The story was one in which little imagination was needed, and yet it held you enthralled. One fact seemed absurd, that of Barter's being able to secrete his many arthropods in his hideout without anyone noticing his moving in.

The other stories were O. K., but seemed to lack originality.

Will you allow me here to offer my deepest apologies to those few readers who some time before Christmas wrote to me and received no reply. It was impossible for me at the time to correspond, but I promise that I can in future remedy that.—Cyril Tiplin, 32 Moorland Rd., Splott, Cardiff, South Wales, Great Britain.

That's It—Catching Flies

Dear Editor:

Why do all of Wesso's characters have to hold their mouths open in expression of amazement? Or are they catching flies?

Why not make the continued stories last only two or at most three issues?

In regard to Paul Hall's letter, by all means don't leave out the "dry science." A. S. is a scientific mag and a darn good one. If you leave out the science, it will descend to the class of ordinary action stories.

Keep up the Hawk Carse stories; they are the almost legendary "different stories."—Andrew M. Reynolds, 600 N. Woods St., Sherman, Tex.

Poor Grandfather!

Dear Editor:

I write this letter to comment, not on the stories, which satisfy me, but on a few letters in the "Corner" of the March issue; especially Mr. Berkowitz' letter.

It is evident that Mr. Berkowitz firmly believes in the plausibility of time-travel, and anxiously awaits the day "when such stupendous events will occur." If he sincerely wishes to be assured of the "possibility" of time travel he can perform the experiment which I will offer further on in this letter.

Since he brought up the question of the time-traveler interfering disastrously with his own birth, I will discuss it. To begin with, let's grant that it is possible to travel in time. A great scientist—let's call him John—perfects a time-machine. Back he goes into time and meets his grandfather, before his father's birth. For some reason John kills his grandfather, thereby preventing his father's birth. Since his father was never born, he could not have been born. Now, since John could not have been born, he could not have perfected his time-machine; and without a time machine he could not go back into the past; and without going back into the past he could not kill his grandfather!! It boils down to this: granting time-traveling to be possible, a man cannot prevent his own birth, because, if he did, he would never be born, and, unless he is born, he is physically incapable of preventing anything. [But why murder grandfather?—Ed.]

Now, if time-traveling is possible, it is also possible to prevent one's own birth; but, since it is not possible to prevent one's own birth, it is not possible to travel in time.

As to the experiment I mentioned. If it is possible to travel in time, a method will one day be discovered. Mr. Berkowitz can write a letter to some scientific organization requesting it to preserve an enclosed letter and give it to the first person who proves he has constructed a time-machine capable of traveling into the past. This enclosed letter will request the time-traveler to come back into time to what is now the present, locate Mr. Berkowitz, and show him the time-machine and explain its principle. Now if he gives the enclosed letter the date he mails it, and requests the time-traveler to visit him a week before he mails it—which would be logical if time-travel is possible—a few complications will arise: when his visitor from the future arrives—a week before he mails the letter—he sees the machine, learns the principle, and enlightens his fellow progers in the darkness; then, when it comes time to mail the letter, he can easily neglect to. Paradoxical? I'll say so, if time-travel is possible.

In reference to Mr. Harp's letter: A space suit could be made of cloth and still retain an atmosphere; though that does not mean one could take his bed sheet, cut it to shape, sew it together and have a reliable space suit. The cloth space suit would be of a very strong material (silk or steel wires) closely woven. Both sides would be covered with a tough layer of rubber, especially on the inside, making the cloth probably an eighth of an inch or more in thickness.

Mr. Sterling is right. A time-machine would not blur, but would simply disappear instantaneously and reappear in the same way if time-travel were possible.

I am anxious to discuss scientific topics with either the readers or the authors of Science Fiction, so I hope you can publish this letter.—Robert Feeney, 5134 Euclid, Kansas City, Mo.

Words Rather Than Pictures

Dear Editor:

I have just finished reading the March Astounding Stories, and was it up to A. S.'s standard? I'll say emphatically yes! Why, with Dr. Bird, Hawk Carse, and Commander Hanson, what could it be except excellent?

"The Affair of the Brain," in my opinion, was better than the first Hawk

Carse story, because in this story Carse acts more like a human being instead of an emotionless, never-erring robot capable of no emotion for either friend or foe. Is Ku Sui dead? If he is, find another enemy for Hawk Carse. Not that I wish Carse bad luck, but please don't drop him from A. S.'s pages—which I don't think you will do, as I see he's made a big hit with other readers.

Some readers ask for more than one illustration to a story; but I think it would be better to keep using for reading matter the space that would be required. That is what the magazine is for; not for illustrations—George Patrikaris, 1682 Park Ave., Schenectady, N. Y.

Soul Stuff

Dear Editor:

I certainly was gratified to see Mr. Gerald Evans' letter re my reintegration theory, with which everybody seemed to agree, one famous author even going so far as to send me a congratulatory communication. I should say, Mr. Evans, you were overly presumptuous in stating what my argument would be. To my mind, it all boils down to a mistaken conception of what a "soul" is, on your part. Judging by your letter, your own personal belief holds the "soul" as being a separate thing from the mind, or intellect, or whatever name you wish to give the driving force of human. Perhaps I am wrong in this deduction, but nevertheless I think you are entitled, to put us on a common ground, to know that to me, the soul, mind, intellect, etc., are all one and the same thing and that this thing is the result of purely chemical reactions to external or internal stimulus. You, as a science enthusiast, doubtless know that the human organism has been thoroughly dissected and analyzed, and that no queer object called a "soul" has been discovered within the anatomy, but that each part has been found to consist of known elements—salts, minerals, etc., which react together to produce these effects: photo-electric action through the optical system, electro-selective action through the nerve ends of the fingers, etc., the various reactions being caused by various external and internal stimuli too numerous to mention. But you see, don't you, that when a multiplicity of bodies are produced on the same pattern, that they don't necessarily have to unanimously perform the same actions, but that their actions *will* depend on exactly the stimuli encountered by *their* nervous system *after* they emerge from the reintegrator?

Yes, they would react in identically the same way to any one stimulus external or internal, but it is absurd to hold that they would mechanically perform the same actions regardless of the source of stimulus—Joseph M. Meulch, 4902 Sixth Ave., Brooklyn, N. Y.

"One of the Gang"

Dear Editor:

I'm a new reader of Astounding Stories, but you can count me in as one of the gang. You sure put out a swell mag.

From what I've read in the "Corner," Gilmore's "Hawk Carse" must have been a corker. I'm doubly sure of this, after reading "The Affair of the Brains."

Anyone wishing to write to me may do so.—D. Liberman, 1777 E. 8th St., Brooklyn, N. Y.

Other Good Letters Received From:

Buel Godwin, 468 First Ave. N. W. Le Mars, Iowa.

Jack Darrow, 4223 N. Spaulding Ave., Chicago, Ill.

Bill Bailey, 1404 Wightman St., Pittsburgh, Pa.

Richard Jale, Sand Springs, Okla.

Andrew Dale, Jr., 205 W. 8th St., Columbia, Tenn.

Seymour Maidich, 2819 Morris Ave., Bronx, New York, N. Y.

Wm. B. Thorley 9 Daverdores Rd., Wallasey, Cheshire, England (who says, "I will answer all letters from A. S. fans in the States.").

Bob Tucker, 304 W. Market St., Bloomington, Ill. (who says, "I would like to correspond with any reader who is near my age, seventeen.").

Anne M. Drouilin, 1521 E. Monument St., Baltimore, Md. (who is seventeen and "would be very happy to correspond with boys and girls elsewhere.").

Ellen Henry, 10 Lawrence Ave., Malverne, L. I., N. Y.

Kenneth P. Haley, 52 Mechanic St., Lebanon, N. H. (who "would be glad to hear from readers, young or old.").

Howard Tyler, Box 463, Atascadero, Cal.

"The Readers' Corner"

All readers are extended a sincere and cordial invitation to "Come over in 'The Readers' Corner'" and join in our monthly discussion of stories, authors, scientific principles and possibilities—everything that's of common interest in connection with our Astounding Stories.

Although from time to time I may make a comment or so, this is a department primarily for *readers*, and I invite you to make full use of it. Likes, dislikes, criticisms, explanations, roses, brickbats, suggestions—everything's welcome here; so "Come over in 'The Readers' Corner'" and discuss it with all of us!

—*The Editor.*

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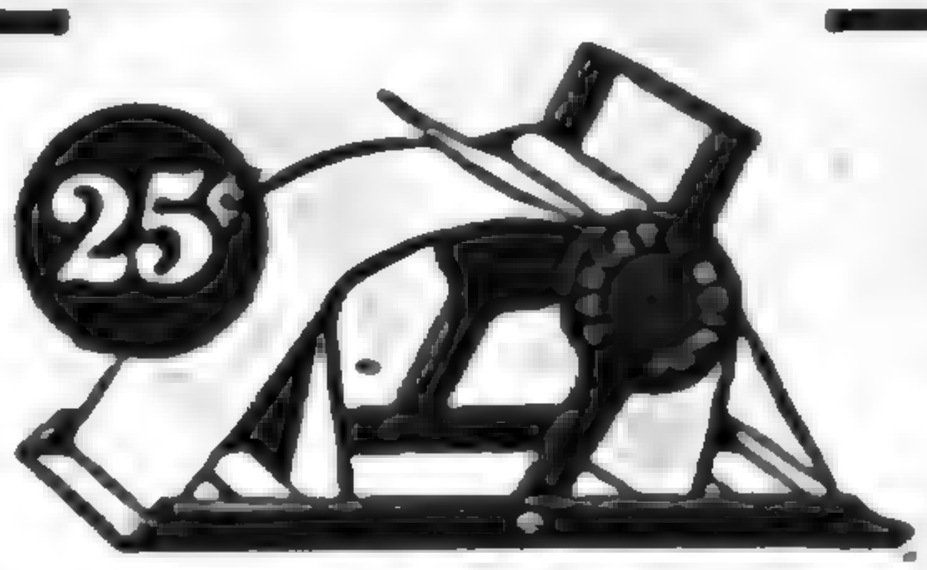

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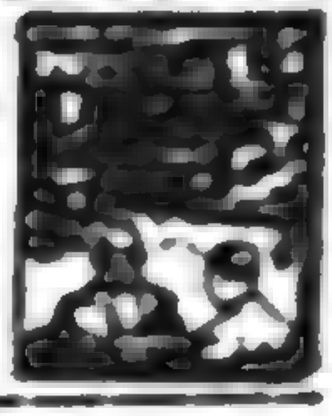

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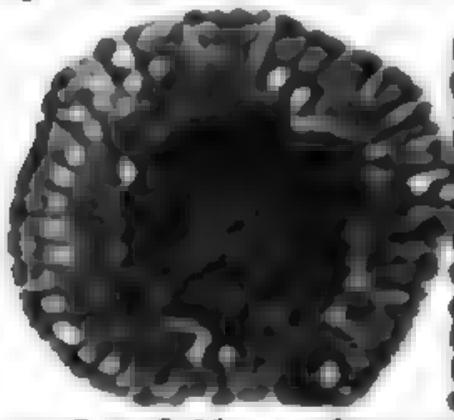

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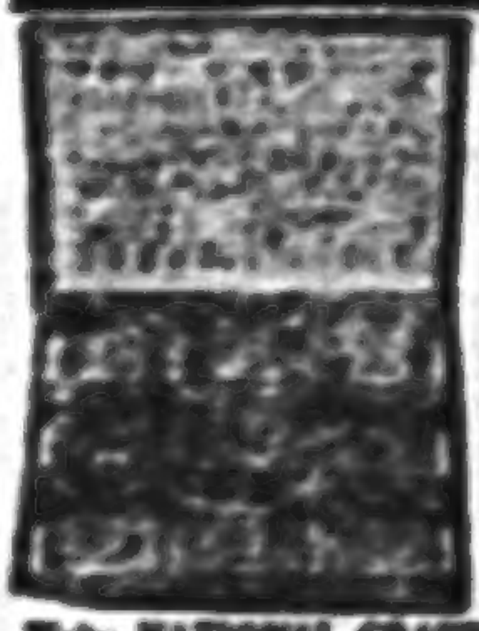

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